National Library of Canada
Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

Canadian Theses Service
Services des thèses canadiennes

Ottawa, Canada
K1A 0N4

CANADIAN THESES
THÈSES CANADIENNES

NOTICE

The quality of this microfiche is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us an inferior photocopy.

Previously copyrighted materials (journal articles, published tests, etc.) are not filmed.

Reproduction in full or in part of this film is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30.

AVIS

La qualité de cette microfiche dépend grandement de la qualité de la thèse soumise au microfilmage. Nous avons tout fait pour assurer une qualité supérieure de reproduction.

S'il manque des pages, veuillez communiquer avec l'université qui a conféré le grade.

La qualité d'impression de certaines pages peut laisser à désirer, surtout si les pages originales ont été dactylographiées à l'aide d'un ruban usé ou si l'université nous a fait parvenir une photocopie de qualité inférieure.

Les documents qui font déjà l'objet d'un droit d'auteur (articles de revue, examens publiés, etc.) ne sont pas microfilmés.

La reproduction, même partielle, de ce microfilm est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30.

THIS DISSERTATION
HAS BEEN MICROFILMED
EXACTLY AS RECEIVED

LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
MICROFILMÉE TELLE QUE
NOUS L'AVONS REÇUE

Canada

NL-339 (r.86/06)

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE UNDERMINING OF CONVENTION IN THE WAVES

by

© MARY K. ALLEN

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL, 1986

Permission has been granted to the National Library of Canada to microfilm this thesis and to lend or sell copies of the film.

The author (copyright owner) has reserved other publication rights, and neither the thesis nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her written permission.

L'autorisation a été accordée à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de microfilmer cette thèse et de prêter ou de vendre des exemplaires du film.

L'auteur (titulaire du droit d'auteur) se réserve les autres droits de publication; ni la thèse ni de longs extraits de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation écrite.

ISBN 0-315-32435-X

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

RELEASE FORM

NAME OF AUTHOR MARY K. ALLEN

TITLE OF THESIS THE UNDERMINING OF CONVENTION IN THE WAVES

DEGREE FOR WHICH THESIS WAS PRESENTED MASTER OF ARTS

YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED FALL, 1986

Permission is hereby granted to THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA LIBRARY to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly or scientific research purposes only.

The author reserves other publication rights, and neither the thesis nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's written permission.

(SIGNED) ...M.K. Allen.....

PERMANENT ADDRESS:

4007 Hollyridge Place

Victoria B.C.

V8N 5Z8

DATED 10 October 1986

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled THE UNDERMINING OF CONVENTION IN THE WAVES submitted by MARY K. ALLEN in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.

.....Shirley T. Neuman.....

Supervisor

.....Rosemary M. Nielsen.....

.....E. D. Blodgett.....

.....L. G. Watson.....

Date....7 October 1986....

Abstract

Virginia Woolf's The Waves is a text which poses problems for interpretation, inviting a variety of readings. These result from the plural nature of the text. The Waves posits numerous possibilities for interpretation which are all equally valid. None is dominant; all are undermined in the tension created by their simultaneous existence. An important tension in The Waves is that between the reading of the text as fiction, with the suspension of disbelief, and the reading of the text as art, as language, with the awareness of its explicit artifice, which undermines the first reading by breaking the illusion of the fiction. Woolf sets up such tensions in the text so that she might examine the conventions which come into play in the writing/reading of the novel.

Chapter One of my thesis examines the episode in which Bernard and Susan visit Elvedon as an example of the tension between the text as fiction/illusion and as artifice. The nature of this episode is uncertain and critical interpretations of it conflict. The episode exemplifies the problematic nature of The Waves which purposely defies certain/closed interpretations.

In Chapter Two, I look at the various attempts critics have made to ignore or overcome the interpretive problem, as they describe the narrative of The Waves in their desire to close the text. Even at the fundamental level of narrative structure, Woolf is questioning conventions. The exact nature of the narrative is unclear, and so certainty

of interpretation is obstructed. Woolf lays bare basic conventions of reading narrative by bringing into question who the narrator is, how the narrative is constructed and to be read, who/what the characters are, and what the nature of their "speeches" might be.

I look more closely at the nature of character and Woolf's process of characterization in Chapter Three. There, especially with the character of Percival, Woolf constructs a tension between the artifice of the convention and the illusion of its effect. That is, she plays with the reader's desire to treat character as real, undermining it with an explicit awareness of character as convention, as a construction of language. Woolf examines, through the characters, the activity of language in characterization.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I examine how, in The Waves, Woolf questions the convention that novels must be "realistic." By positing and then undermining the possible realistic aspects of the text, Woolf reveals the arbitrary nature of conventional standards of literary realism, and so brings into question the definition and function of the "realistic" in her text.

Woolf provides no answers in her questioning of literary conventions; she only examines the conventional answers to the questions of how to read narrative, how to read character, and dissects them in The Waves to show that they are unnecessary and that the novel can go beyond their restricting/closing confines.

Table of Contents

Chapter — Page

I. Elvedon and the Problematic Nature of *The Waves* 1

II. The Narrative and the Problems it Poses for Criticism 23

III. The Question of Character and Characterization 41

IV. The Question of the Realistic 77

BIBLIOGRAPHY 100

I. Elvedon and the Problematic Nature of *The Waves*

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* is a text which continually questions its genre and examines the activity of writing, working to expose novelistic conventions as arbitrary and restrictive. Woolf refuses to close the text by provoking conflicting interpretations, providing numerous possibilities for meaning without allowing any of them the precedence of certainty, which would act to close meaning. The first narrative section of *The Waves*, in which the characters Bernard and Susan visit the garden at Elvedon, see a woman writing, and make an "escape," provides a good example of the problematic nature of *The Waves*. How this episode fits into the rest of the narrative is uncertain. Does Elvedon exist? Do the children really make a visit there? If they do, what exactly happens during their visit? Why must they "escape"? Or is the escape merely an aspect of Bernard's sensationalizing of the event, of his imaginative commentary on what happens? Is the whole visit a figment of Bernard's imagination expressed as a story to Susan? Or is the story even told? Does it, in fact, originate within the mediating/controlling voice of a single narrator? These are questions which can be asked in the attempt to outline the various possibilities of interpretation of the episode, and which suggest the difficulty of discussion.[1]

---

[1] The Elvedon episode is rarely examined closely in discussions of *The Waves*, perhaps on account of its obviously problematic nature. A number of critics who write about *The Waves* mention the Elvedon episode briefly, but only Boone provides a major examination of it. Richardson seems to assume that Elvedon is real, but does acknowledge

One article which does investigate the nature of the Elvedon episode closely is Joseph Allan Boone's "The Meaning of Elvedon in The Waves: A Key to Bernard's experience and Woolf's Vision." Boone begins by laying out the basic presuppositions of his argument, that is, the way in which he decides to answer the questions which the text poses. He opens the article with the statement that

> Near the beginning of The Waves, the child Bernard creates a story to rescue Susan from her "knotted-up" sorrow. By conjuring words from the "depths" of his mind, he imaginatively carries her to the mythical kingdom of Elvedon. (Boone 629)

Boone assumes from the start that the Elvedon episode is only a story told by Bernard, not an actual experience. Elvedon, by this premise, is a "mythical kingdom" with no

---

[1](cont'd) the problematic relationship between the gardens of the interlude, the first scene, and Elvedon (Richardson 704). Mendez notices the metafictional aspect of the episode saying that "from within the novel, the woman writing appears to [Bernard] as a mysterious and perhaps powerful presence, suggesting that life itself may be a work of art" (Mendez, "Virginia Woolf and the Voices of Silence" 110). Mendez suggests that the woman might be Woolf writing The Waves. Little suggests that "there may really have been a woman writing in the garden," but that the adventure is imaginary (Little 80). James Naremore discusses the episode as an actual event coloured by the "creations of [the children's] vivid imaginations" (Naremore 168). He also comments that "this is one of the few scenes in the book where the reader feels that one character has heard everything the other has said" (Naremore 168). Lotus Snow does admit to the reality of Elvedon, but assumes that it is the location of the children's nursery, that the whole first section occurs there (Snow 72). Other critics who mention Elvedon differ about how the episode relates to the characters. Guiguet calls it "the imaginary Elvedon" (Guiguet 288); Rantavaara says it is the children's "private boarding school" (Rantavaara 10); Fleishman calls it a "dream world" (Fleishman 156), Love, a "mythical land" (Love 202), and Kelley, a "fantasy about the town of Elvedon" (Kelley 155).

"real" counterpart in the world of the fiction, Bernard's world. Certainly, this assumption seems supportable, but it does ignore some important probabilities. To begin with, that Elvedon should be a fiction created ex nihilo by Bernard is unlikely. There is no precedent which might lead the reader to believe that Bernard is making up a story about Elvedon. Until this point in the text, Bernard has only used language in an attempt to describe the world he experiences, the "real" world of the narrative. The first time Bernard describes reality in an imaginative way, he breaks away from realistic description only by means of simile.[2] That is, he speaks figuratively only to use comparison to complete his description; he is in no way fictionalizing or describing an imagined event.

> "Now [Susan] walks across the field with a swing, nonchalantly, to deceive us. Then she comes to the dip; she thinks she is unseen; she begins to run with her fists clenched in front of her. Her nails meet in the ball of her pocket-handkerchief. She is making for the beech woods out of the light. She spreads her arms as she comes to them and takes to the shade like a swimmer. But she is blind after the light and trips and flings herself down on the roots under the trees, where the light seems to pant in and out, in and out. The branches heave up and down. There is agitation and trouble here. There is gloom.

---

[2] I use "simile" in this thesis as a conceptual tool. The term is used here to describe how the specific figure, "'like a swimmer,'" acts as a device for comparison. Metaphors act similarly in the wake of the initial simile. Consequently, I use the term "simile" to describe the device as a part of Bernard's narrative style, even when the specific figure of simile is absent. I recognize that there are theoretical implications to equating simile and metaphor. I do not mean to do this. There is a difference between the two. However, for the purposes of this thesis, "simile" will also function as a general concept based on its etymological association to "similis." I hope to make this clearer in the text.

> The light is fitful. There is anguish here." (emphasis added) (10)

This passage is important because it marks, for Bernard, the beginning of the Elvedon episode. The relationship here between the real and the imagined, and the narrative treatment of the real, is therefore relevant to the nature of the later narrative when the two characters are, by Bernard's account, in Elvedon. Bernard's description of Susan begins in a very unradical manner. He, as narrator, takes the not-unusual liberty of imagining his character's thoughts and motives. Because Susan is as real as Bernard in the fictive world of the text, Bernard does not, by realistic standards, read her thoughts; imaginative assumption is accepted as a convention of narrative, even when that narrative is not fiction but description.

The reader has no reason, at this point, to say that Bernard is "telling a story" or imagining the whole description. Bernard is articulating sensation, describing Susan as he sees her and ascribing motives to her actions. He describes not so much her as his perception of her, coloured by his understanding and his ability to express it, in his own terms. The rest of the description,[3] although it seems less realistic, is really no different. Just as the first sentences mark Bernard's understanding of Susan in terms that he knows, so the sentences which follow involve,

---

[3] "The roots make a skeleton on the ground, with dead leaves heaped in the angles. Susan has spread her anguish out. Her pocket-handkerchief is laid on the roots of the beech trees and she sobs, sitting crumpled where she has fallen."(10)

more technically, comparison of the unknown with the known. The simile of Susan's "'[taking] to the shade like a swimmer'" is of the same nature as Bernard's earlier attribution of thought to her. He describes her movement in terms he understands and so can readily express. The simile works not only as a specific image, but exemplifies the method underlying this whole description.[4] The next part of the passage following the simile seems to be much more imaginative and unrealistic, but again it is no different. Bernard is still describing Susan's experience as a narrator, from her perspective, and, from that point of view, describing nature in terms Susan understands. There is a double "simile" at work here; nature is, or acts, like Susan, who in turn is, or thinks, like Bernard, because, of course, that is the nature of the kind of understanding and description by analogy which has been introduced through Bernard's narrative-like style and his use of simile/-comparison. So, when Bernard says, describing what Susan is experiencing, "'but she is blind after the light and trips and flings herself down on the roots under the trees, where the light seems to pant in and out, in and out,'" he is making an analogy between the movement of the light and the rhythm of Susan's breath.[5] The light only "'seems'" to be panting because Susan, according to Bernard's description, is projecting her experience upon what she sees, just as

---

[4] See note 2.
[5] The personification in this passage, like the metaphors, works as "simile," setting up a comparison between Susan and nature.

Bernard projects his understanding upon her. And so, the scene is described imaginatively,[4] but is no less "real" for its treatment. The beech wood is behaving like Susan because of the comparison, not because it is to be seen as really behaving that way. It is difficult to say, then, that, because the description seems unrealistic because narrated, Susan and the wood do not exist, but are only part of a story created by Bernard. Because he describes the scene using techniques of narrative does not mean that this description must be a fiction.

Similarly, just because Bernard narrates most of the Elvedon episode and does so in an imaginative manner, the episode is not necessarily a fiction. The Elvedon episode proper is narrated in essentially the same fashion as the description of Susan which acts as a transition into it. Bernard's remark, "'we shall sink like swimmers just touching the ground with the tips of their toes'" (11), is really no different from the previous simile describing Susan's movement into the beech wood. The very entry to Elvedon is expressed in simile, thus suggesting that the action of the two characters is, at this point, no less real than Susan's earlier action. Bernard's narrative style in the Elvedon episode is consistent with the earlier comment because that is the way that he uses language and describes experience. His style is emphasized by comparison to the way Susan uses language. Just before he begins to talk of Elvedon, she

---

[4] I distinguish between articulation of something imagined and the imaginative articulation of something experienced.

says:

> "I see the beetle. . . . it is black, I see; It is green, I see; I am tied down with single words. But you wander off; you slip away; you rise up higher, with words and words in phrases." (11)[7]

Susan is here confronting the problem of articulating experience in words, of describing reality. She is limited to single words, to listing predicates of the object she sees in an attempt to present the object in words, to capture the signified. Also, she is limited by her seeing. She can only describe the object as she perceives it; she cannot, like Bernard, "'slip away'" into imaginative description of the object as it is conceived.[8] Susan is tied down by the need to close language upon a signified. She is caught up in the reality of the object and therefore simplifies her language in an attempt to present as signified the object which she privileges over language.

---

[7] Barzilai comments on Bernard and Susan's different usage of personal pronouns:

> The differences between Bernard and Susan are not exhausted by their predilection for different pronomial forms. . . . In contrast to Susan, who sees herself as a distinct unit—"I"—within a pluralistic reality, Bernard's vision is integrative, and therefore he is a "phrase-maker." He transcends the singular through the artist's capacity for synthesis, for creating contiguities where none existed before. (224-5)

[8] I distinguish here between perception and conception to mark the difference between Susan who tries to translate sensation into language, what she perceives, and Bernard who tries to put thoughts into language, reality as he mediates it, as he imaginatively conceives it. This is a creative activity on Bernard's part—he is re-creating reality in language, not attempting to present it and so make language real by linking signifier and signified as Susan seeks to do—but this is not to say that Bernard is creating a new, imagined, fiction.

Bernard, however, uses the object as a starting point from which he will "'wander off,'" moving from Susan's single word predicates, which are attempts to identify or correspond with the object, to phrases which go beyond the object for the sake of the language itself. However, Bernard never loses sight of the object which is the focus of his description.

> "Now," said Bernard, "let us explore. There is the white house lying among the trees. It lies down there ever so far beneath us. We shall sink like swimmers just touching the ground with the tips of their toes. We shall sink through the green air of the leaves, Susan. We sink as we run. The waves close over us, the beech leaves meet above our heads. There is the stable clock with its gilt hands shining. Those are the flats and heights of the roofs of the great house. There is the stable-boy clattering in the yard in rubber boots. That is Elvedon." (emphasis added) (11)

Bernard never allows his language to break away completely from the reality he is describing; he maintains it as a necessary model. In comparison to Susan, whose experience and expression never leave the ground—the beetle and the language of describing the beetle—Bernard escapes her entrapped circumstance, but still maintains contact just as his "'swimmers'" keep their toes "'just touching the ground.'" Bernard's language signifies not only indicatively, through the association (though not the equation) of word and object,* but also metaphorically, through comparison, by parallelling metaphor and object. In this way, the manner in which "'the beech leaves meet above [their]

---

* An example of this is the statement "'That is Elvedon.'" Bernard is not comparing or describing here. He is pointing (indicating/indicative); he is naming.

heads'" is compared to the waves, in a parallel structure which underlines the process of comparison. The use of wave and water imagery is then continued in the description of the Elvedon adventure not as something created or imagined, but as a metaphoric support for what is otherwise an attempt to describe the real. Detailed lines, such as the one about "'the stable clock with its gilt hands shining,'" construct a conventionally realistic description which contrasts with the metaphors which suggest the unreal and which work to undermine that realism.

The text thus involves a tension between realistic detail and non-realistic metaphor. This tension leads to the uncertain nature of the episode. There is a strong suggestion that Bernard's description of the episode might be story, but the context of the episode works to undermine the assertion that it should be fiction, a story without real substance, as the nature of Bernard's characteristic use of language also does. It is not an aspect of Bernard's storytelling that he should create a fiction out of nothing. Usually, Bernard's stories are not creations, but transformations of reality. For example, the first time Bernard speaks of telling stories, he obviously uses his experience of the "real" world, transforming it with his imagination. He is <u>not</u> creating a story out of nothing. Instead, he is making use of his immediate environment to create an imagined one, independent of his actual experience.

> "Let us now crawl," said Bernard, "under the canopy of the currant leaves, and tell stories. Let us

> inhabit the underworld. Let us take possession of our secret territory, which is lit by pendant currants like candelabra, shining red on one side, black on the other. . . . We are in a swamp now; in a malarial jungle. There is an elephant white with maggots, killed by an arrow shot dead in its eye. The bright eyes of hopping birds—eagles, vultures — are apparent. They take us for fallen trees. They pick at a worm—that is a hooded cobra— and leave it with a festering brown scar to be mauled by lions. This is our world, lit with crescents and stars of light; and great petals half transparent block the openings like purple windows. Everything is strange. Things are huge and very small. The stalks of flowers are thick as oak trees. Leaves are high as the domes of vast cathedrals. We are giants, lying here, who can make forests quiver." (15-6)

This passage, acknowledged as part of story-telling, demonstrates how Bernard tends to move from experience to imagination in the process of telling stories. He uses his experience of the real object, the worm for example, as material for an imagined object, the hooded cobra. Similarly, he transforms hopping birds into vultures, and flowers into trees in his need to create a fictional world, something beyond the apparent reality in order to discover/describe the fundamental truth of that reality by breaking through its perceived surface. But, Bernard cannot tell his stories without some real model; he can only develop a fiction by transforming reality not by breaking with it. He needs the world of the currant leaves in order to create a fictional world beneath them. In this way, this story is similar to the Elvedon episode in which Bernard moves from the real description of the beech wood to the unreal image of the waves, and from what seems to be the realistic setting of Elvedon to a sensational

description of what happens there.

However, there is a marked difference between the two examples. In the "world" of the currant leaves, Bernard imagines an event which he and Jinny do not experience. They are obviously static figures, lying like giants, around whom Bernard creates a fantasy. Furthermore, Jinny shows no evidence of being at all involved in the fantasy. Jinny is distanced from the story; her reaction is as someone firmly attached to experience, to the real world of the currant leaves, and is remarkably unimaginative in terms of escape into imagination. She says, "'this is here . . . this is now. But soon we shall go. Soon Miss Curry will blow her whistle. We shall walk. We shall part'" (16). There is no communication here between Bernard and Jinny in terms of the story. Their only shared experience is the lying beneath the currants. Jinny takes no part in the story itself, but instead makes her own imaginative, though not imagined, leaps which are completely unrelated to Bernard's. "'[Her] hand is like a snake's skin. [Her] knees are pink floating islands'" (16). In contrast, Susan, even with her inability to escape the empirical through language, is involved in the story Bernard tells of Elvedon. Susan "'see[s] the lady writing'" and "'the gardeners sweeping'" (12); that is, she experiences the reality of the episode just as she does the beetle and just as Jinny experiences the currant leaves. Furthermore, unlike Jinny, she remembers them later in life

as a memory of experience, not of story.[10] Yet, the woman

---

[10] Susan remembers:

> "I hold some scissors and snip off the hollyhocks, who went to Elvedon and trod on rotten oak-apples, and saw the lady writing and the gardeners with their great brooms. We ran back panting lest we should be shot and nailed like stoats to the wall." (130)
>
> "There was the beech wood," said Susan, "Elvedon, and the gilt hands of the clock sparkling among the trees." (145)

Bernard also remembers.

> "At Elvedon the gardeners swept and swept with their great brooms, and the woman sat at a table writing," said Bernard. (84)
>
> "Susan cried and I followed her. Her wet pocket-handkerchief, and the sight of her little back heaving up and down like a pump-handle, sobbing for what was denied her, screwed my nerves up. 'That is not to be borne,' I said, as I sat beside her on the roots that were hard as skeletons. I then first became aware of the presence of those enemies who change, but are always there; the forces we fight against. To let oneself be carried on passively is unthinkable. 'That's your course, world,' one says, 'mine is this.' So, 'Let's explore,' I cried, and jumped up, and ran downhill with Susan and saw the stable-boy clattering about the yard in great boots. Down below, through the depths of the leaves, the gardeners swept the lawns with great brooms. The lady sat writing. Transfixed, stopped dead, I thought, 'I cannot interfere with a single stroke of those brooms. They sweep and they sweep. Nor with the fixity of that woman writing.' It is strange that one cannot stop gardeners sweeping nor dislodge a woman. There they have remained all my life." (162-3)
>
> "Sitting down on a bank to wait for my train, I thought then how we surrender, how we submit to the stupidity of nature. Woods covered in thick green leafage lay in front of me. And by some flick of a scent or sound on a nerve, the old image—the gardeners sweeping, the lady writing—returned. I saw the figures beneath the beech trees at Elvedon. The gardeners swept; the lady at the table sat writing." (181-2)

and the gardeners are not so obviously, like the currants, part of Bernard's environment as he tells the story. If, as Boone asserts, Elvedon is a "mythical kingdom," and the whole episode unreal, then the woman and the gardeners are not real, but only characters of that myth, that story. And so, on that assumption, Susan would, in fact, be experiencing one of Bernard's stories in a very different way than Jinny does. Alternatively, Elvedon must exist and be experienced in the same way as the currant leaves.

If, therefore, the Elvedon episode must be seen as an actual adventure experienced by Bernard and Susan, that is, an episode in which the two characters actually go to the place, experience something, and leave, then this episode is certainly of a different nature from the story told with Jinny. In the latter episode, Bernard is sitting in one place with Jinny and telling a story in which he imagines his environment differently, exotically. In the Elvedon episode, by contrast, Bernard's narrative is not of an unreal world replacing the real, but of a real experience described in unreal terms. Susan and Bernard actually partake in an activity which Bernard describes imaginatively (not imagined), with the same style as his usual "realistic" descriptions. And so, the Elvedon episode is not told in the same manner as Bernard's stories. He does not seem to have made Elvedon up, but is describing a real experience in a style similar to the narrative of his stories using similar narrative devices. The Elvedon episode could be called a

narrative, perhaps, but not a "story." It is the articulation of experience, not of imagination. The distinction between narrative description and imagined story can be seen also between Bernard's description of Dr. Crane, and the story he tries to tell about the Doctor. In the description, Bernard elaborates with similes, in the nature of his descriptions.

> "Old Crane," said Bernard, "now rises to address us. Old Crane, the Headmaster, has a nose like a mountain at sunset, and a blue cleft in his chin, like a wooded ravine, which some tripper has fired; like a wooded ravine seen from the train window. He sways slightly, mouthing out his tremendous and sonorous words. I love tremendous and sonorous words. But his words are too hearty to be true. Yet he is by this time convinced of their truth. And when he leaves the room, lurching rather heavily from side to side, and hurls his way through the swing-doors, all the masters, lurching rather heavily from side to side, hurl themselves also through the swing-doors." (22)

In this passage, Bernard is attempting to describe a "real" object, a real experience, and is carried away by the language into a narrative. Unlike Susan, Bernard cannot limit himself to simple statements such as those about the beetle, but wanders off, entranced by the language, by the "'tremendous and sonorous words'" until he is caught up in the parallel description of Crane and the masters, emphasizing the style rather than the "reality" of the description. For Bernard, the style, the description itself takes on more importance than what he is describing. But he needs that object in order to succeed in the description. In contrast, the story he tells about Dr. Crane fails because Bernard has nothing concrete to describe, but is attempting

to create a story about something he has no experience of. The story of Dr. Crane begins with a reference to the previous description, but breaks away into an imagined story about what Dr. Crane does beyond the door which Bernard cannot pass.

> "I will tell you the story of the doctor.
>
> "When Dr. Crane lurches through the swing-doors after prayers he is convinced, it seems, of his immense superiority; . . . Now let us follow him as he heaves through the swing-door to his own apartments. Let us imagine him in his private room over the stables undressing. He unfastens his sock suspenders (let us be trivial, let us be intimate). Then with a characteristic gesture (it is difficult to avoid these ready-made phrases, and they are, in his case, somehow appropriate) he takes the silver, he takes the coppers from his trouser pockets and places them there, and there, on his dressing-table. With both arms stretched on the arms of his chair he reflects (this is his private moment; it is here we must try to catch him): shall he cross the pink bridge into his bedroom or shall he not cross it? . . . So there he sits, swinging his braces. But stories that follow people into their private rooms are difficult. I cannot go on with this story." (33-4)

Because Bernard acknowledges that he has no experience of what he is narrating, he feels the need to mediate this assertion of its reality. He continually interjects commentary upon the status of his narrative as story. He says, "'it seems,'" "'it is difficult to avoid these ready made phrases,'" and "'stories that follow people into their private rooms are difficult.'"[11] With this last point Bernard recognizes that he "'cannot go on with [the] story.'" Bernard is aware here of the artificial nature

---

[11] Boris Uspensky calls such remarks "words of estrangement" because they "estrange" or make external the point of view, create a sense of external narration. (Uspensky 85)

of his description and cannot complete it. Stories of people in their private rooms are difficult for Bernard because they demand that he imagine not only the story but also its source. He has no model to rely upon as he does in his descriptions.

The Elvedon narrative contains no such commentary by Bernard. Instead, he is too involved in the actual adventure to reflect upon the nature of what he is saying.[12] There is no certain evidence that the Elvedon episode is only a story. In the first draft of the book, however, Elvedon is depicted as a real place which the children do actually visit. This version defies interpretation as an imagined story. The episode as it exists in the final text is, by contrast, not obviously a real adventure. Important changes have occurred between the drafts. The first draft of the episode in which Bernard is given the name Roger, treates the episode in a very conventional manner:

> He said, 'Let's explore' . . .
> for There was a clearing in the beechwood;
> ~~& at the bo~~
> ~~beneath the hill~~ & beneath, at the bottom
> of the steep slope,
> lay an old white country house, like a toy
> under a
> glass shade, with its conservatory & its
> orchard; its
> lawn & its flower beds, all as serene as
> if this were
> the end of the 18th century & . . . . .
> & a coach would come bowling down the drive,

---

[12]This can be contrasted to many of Bernard's other speeches in which he is especially self-conscious. For example, the story about Old Crane or more explicitly such statements as "'I am here quoting my own biographer'" (52) and, even more so, "'she will feel "Bernard is posing as a literary man; Bernard is thinking of his biographer" (which is true)'" (53).

& the steps
would be let down, & a lady in hooped silk, leaning on the
footman's hand would descend. It would be Lets explore a great lark, &
great joke, Roger said, to go down & explore the house, for
nobody had ever been there. It lay beyond the rim of
knowledge. All anyone had ever seen was a sign post at the
crossroads, pointing 'to Elvedon'. They went to Elvedon &
saw a lady writing between two windows & gardeners
& flourished brushing the lawn beyond with great brooms. Scared by a
a spade at stable boy who came into the yard & ~~grin looked at~~ threatened them,
them, they ran back again, into the woods, & looked ~~back~~
down at the gilt clock; & the green stable roof, & the
~~sparkly~~ conservatory among sparkling the trees., and Roger
A pigeon clattered out "beating the air with wooden wings"—
Roger made the phrase, pulling Susan skirts & looking back;
Looking back, she saw ~~looking down~~, at the stables
& the ~~trees~~ lawn, she saw them sparkling & strange. ~~Looking~~
~~Are our~~ She saw
~~them through with~~ through the light of this extraordinary
glitter, confusion, extension, irradiation — Thus she had her sobs
on the grass; Roger came; Lets explore he said; & like a light
breaking; everything had suddenly — as if the hard stone had
burst & spread its light its tide over the mind &
she, parched & stony. had basked in its lumped emerald, its
electric tide, its brisk & sparkling water & all her
[tears?] had flown through her — I
(Holograph 78-9)

This description of Elvedon is in a more traditional mode. Whereas in the final version Bernard relates the episode, thus

involving the question of narrative status, this version is told in the third person, thereby providing a detached voice of authority which gives credence to a literal reading. Furthermore, the description "as if this were the end of the 18th century," makes a comparison which asserts that the time of the adventure is not the 18th century, but now, in the present of Roger (Bernard) and Susan. In the final version, this assertion of Elvedon's being within the same time as the children is suggested by Bernard's statement "'Now, . . . let us explore'" (emphasis added) (11). But the question of space is more problematic than that of time. The important point is whether Elvedon exists within the same space as Bernard and Susan, that they can therefore physically visit it. In the first draft, the geography of Elvedon is more explicit and so therefore is the relation of the children to that space. What becomes, finally, a fall "'through the tree-tops to the earth [where] the ~~air~~ no longer rolls its long, unhappy, purple waves over [them]'" (11), is originally suggested by the need for the children to descend the hill from which they first view Elvedon. The ground to which the children fall is described as "the bottom of the steep slope." This change, then, this "metaphorization" of the literal, thus brings the realism of the first draft into question in the last.

Another important element introduced in the final version is the metaphor of the waves. When the children descend into Elvedon, they descend beneath the waves, the

dominant metaphor of the text. This suggests that the children are entering a metaphoric level of the text, that the adventure is metaphoric instead of, or in addition to, being realistic. This is also implied by the lines:

> "Now we are in the ringed wood with the wall round it. This is Elvedon. I have seen signposts at the cross-roads with one arm pointing 'To Elvedon'. No one has been there. The ferns smell very strong, and there are red funguses growing beneath them. Now we wake the sleeping daws who have never seen a human form; now we tread on rotten oak apples, red with age and slippery. There is a ring of wall round this wood; nobody comes here." (emphasis added) (11)

This description, which Boone says "invoke[s] a timeless enclosed realm," an "elf-eden," does suggest that Elvedon exists in an unreal space, that it is unreal because bound by language as a linguistic construct. Elvedon is named by the text; the phrases, "'This is Elvedon,'" "'ring of wall,'" and "'no one has been here'" further suggest the unreal, because enclosed and alienated, nature of the place. Perhaps the most powerful suggestion that Elvedon is only a construction of language is that it exists solely because there is a signpost which names it, refers to it, signifies it. Elvedon is thus depicted as a world of signifiers, as a world of language, of the text.

The reading of the episode which results from this metaphoric depiction demands that Bernard and Susan, as characters in some story (perhaps Bernard's), visit a land of literature, of a textual reality. Here they encounter the woman writing, the author. The adventure is, in these terms, one of two characters who visit the author within her realm

which no one, or no character, has visited before; it is dangerous territory for any character. How, after all, can a character exist within the same world as its author? The result of this intrusion into the author's realm is potential violence, the death and subsequent obscurity of the character Susan says, "'If we died here, nobody would bury us'" (12). This is because in the metaphoric state of what is, for them, an unreal world, they must have no real substance. If they are seen, they will be destroyed because their status in that world, as unreal characters, will be recognized. For a character to confront the author is for it to recognize its unreality and so to cease to exist.[13] Bernard and Susan, as characters in the metaphoric plane of the Elvedon episode, are in danger of being shot by the gardeners, "'nailed like stoats to the stable door'" or "'shot like jays and pinned to the wall'" (12). Their potential destruction involves being pinned down, as characters closed by language, another servant of the author.

---

[13] Judy Little describes the woman writing as "an image of authorial consciousness, saying that she is therefore a "killer" (Little 81). Little questions the reason for the "fierce imagery" in the episode:

> This violent imagery seems at first inconsistent with the usual interpretation of the woman's significance — that is, that she represents the presiding and creating consciousness of the author. Of course there is a certain logic to the idea that characters who discover their author risk destruction; they supposedly would recognize their complete fictionality, their nonexistence. (Little 81)

This metaphoric reading of the episode emphasizes the fact that the episode is a narrative, that Bernard and Susan are unreal, unsubstantial characters not only in the metaphoric space of Elvedon, but also as part of the realistic space of the literal reading of the text. In this way, a metaphoric treatment of the Elvedon episode is not opposed to the assertion that Elvedon should be a "real" place (in terms of the fictional world of the characters). The alteration of the episode from the original draft introduces an ambiguity which underlies the tension between realism and unrealism in the novel. To treat Elvedon as real is not to demand realism, but rather to make the necessary transition between the characters of the metaphoric reading and the Susan and Bernard of the realistically determined world of the fiction. Recognizing the stylistic context of the episode, that is, in terms of how Bernard tells stories or relates descripions, aids an understanding of the nature of the narration of the episode and so leads to a literal reading which is simultaneous with the metaphoric. The final narrative is not an example of traditional realism; however, the style of the narrative is the same as Bernard's realistic descriptions. That is, the Elvedon narrative is as realistic a description as Bernard can produce. Although the episode may not seem real, and its realism may be questionable in terms of the metaphoric reading, there is little question that it is real for Bernard, and so, that it is as real as Bernard and the rest of his world. The literal

reading thus leads to the metaphoric questioning of character while, at the same time, asserting the reality of that character.

The Elvedon episode is important not because it differs from the rest of the text, but because it exemplifies the problematic nature of that text. Were the episode undeniably fictive to Bernard, then it would act to assert Bernard's "reality." He would be a "real" character telling a fictional story. However, because the episode marks Elvedon as part of Bernard's "real" world, it brings into question Bernard's "reality." That is, if the Elvedon episode is as real as Bernard, and the episode is of questionable status in terms of traditional realism, being in the form of a narrative with the story-like suggestions that involves, then Bernard, too, must have a questionable status as a "real" character. The Elvedon narrative clearly demonstrates the way The Waves works to make conventional aspects of the novel, such as the assumed reality of character, questionable. By undermining such traditional assumptions, Woolf removes the illusion of the possibility of certain interpretation which other, more closed texts rely on. Without this illusion, the process of the text is revealed and so also Woolf's examination of how language and the text work.

II. The Narrative and the Problems it Poses for Criticism

An investigation of the Elvedon episode is useful not only because the episode, as mentioned earlier, exemplifies the problematic nature of the text, but because the investigation itself uncovers the problem of discussing the text at all. How the Elvedon episode is read is determined very much by assumptions the reader may make about the narrative. The text of The Waves defies the traditional expectations not only of realism, but also of narrative. Rather than restrict itself to a more closed narrative structure dependent upon traditional narrative techniques, The Waves undergoes a continuous process of deconstruction, playing with the reader's expectations of narrative by setting up and undermining them. This makes the text difficult to interpret and discuss. Interpretation demands that one assume that the narrative devices will function in certain ways. Most, if not all criticism of the text, then, results in restrictive readings because of narrative presuppositions which tend to close the text, ignoring the problematic nature of the narrative.

On one level, this is clear in Boone's interpretation of the Elvedon episode. His assumptions that the episode is a "story" and that Elvedon is a "mythical kingdom" involve a number of fundamental presuppositions about the nature of The Waves. First, the statement that the episode is a story presupposes a conventional definition of story. That it be a fiction, for example. As I have tried to demonstrate,

Bernard's stories are of three sorts though all use techniques of narrative (as in the description of Susan) and so might be called stories: his completely imagined stories, created ex nihilo, as in the story of Dr. Crane; his stories which are transformations of experience, as in the currant leaf "world"; and his imaginative descriptions of reality, as Elvedon. "Story" is a complicated element in the text; what is meant, after all, by "Bernard's stories"? Boone fails to consider the complex possibilities for story/narrative in the text and talks of story as "created," as fiction/myth. Because the episode is one of Bernard's stories, that is, narrated/told by Bernard, Boone assumes that it is a fiction and that Elvedon must therefore be a "myth."

Herein lies Boone's second presupposition with regard to the status of the text. What exactly does he mean by "mythical"? Myth could describe many aspects of the text from the "mythical" description of sunrise to the "mythical" nature of Susan as "earth goddess." Boone opposes the "mythical" Elvedon to the supposedly "unmythical" world of the text. But if myth, as a general problematic concept is so prevalent in the work, this opposition is impossible. Does it mean anything to say that Elvedon is a myth in the context of what could be described as a very "mythical" text? Boone again presupposes an aspect of the text, myth, as a definable, functional concept. However, his statement about Elvedon's "mythical" status is undermined by the

problematic, because undefined, possibilities for "myth"—whatever that word may or can mean—in the text. Boone seems to want meaning in a text which refuses to mean. He asks, "But what, exactly, is Elvedon a symbol of, and how is its meaning generated?" (Boone 629). He wants the text to provide him with interpretable symbols which will generate a meaning. He says that Elvedon is Woolf's "attempt to articulate a meaning beyond words" (629) and proceeds to seek out that meaning as if he could articulate it in words. In this search for meaning, Boone attempts to close the text, believing that he can discover, as his title suggests, "the Meaning of Elvedon in The Waves" and provide "a Key" to understanding the text, as if it were a simple code to be deciphered, unlocked. But the text is not. The labels Boone uses—story, myth, symbol — are too limited to deal with a text which defies labels. As soon as "myth" appears graspable to the reader as a concept for dealing with the text, "myth" occurs in some other form, or rather, chameleon-like, it is transformed in the active process of the text. By making these assumptions/definitions about narrative elements suggested in The Waves, Boone, like most critics attempting to discuss the text, oversimplifies and restricts his reading; his theory closes itself to the varied possibilities in the narrative, to certain opposing characteristics of the narrative, to the plural nature of the narrative.

Boone's problem is the problem of any critic writing about The Waves. How is one to interpret and describe a text whose plurality allows it to elude labels, to elude the naming involved in description and interpretation? The investigation I have made earlier, which tries always to acknowledge the plurality of the text, contains presuppositions about the narrative because of the difficulty of discussing a text without being able to say exactly what one is discussing. So, for example, for the purposes of discussion, I assume that there are characters. This is questionable. Guiguet, for example, notes "the everlasting question of 'characters'" in The Waves (Guiguet 297). Just as Boone makes certain decisions which allow him to say something, so must I and anyone who wants to use language to deal with The Waves assume the nature of certain concepts in order to work with them, to say something. Readings must concern, because of the necessary choice of a language of interpretation, the text as a predetermined object whose nature is also predetermined by that discourse.

The investigation of the Elvedon episode, because it is so problematic as critical contradictions show—for example, that it should be read as a real or as an imagined episode—provides an awareness of the difficulty of discussion and interpretation. The greatest obstacle to a closed interpetation of this text is the nature of the narrative. The web of narrative obscurity and intervention must make interpretation difficult. After all, how is one to

understand the text when one is so unsure not only of who is speaking, and what degree of mediation is involved, but even whether anything is actually spoken? The first step, then, in examining the problems which The Waves poses is to describe the enigmatic nature of the narrative. The only certain thing one can say about the text of The Waves is that it is divided into two parts. The first part consists of passages printed in italics. These have been called, by various critics, interchapters, prologues, exordia, and interludes, all of which presuppose something about the nature of these italicized passages. "Interchapter," by defining the passages as something which divides chapters, places an undue emphasis on the chapters themselves. "Exordium" similarly de-emphasizes the status of the passages, labelling them in terms of a formal device solely as introductions. "Prologue" is a more interesting term since it means (pro-logos) "before the word" and so implies that the passages have a kind of non-linguistic status as compared to the rest of the text seen as logos. Finally, "interlude" is Woolf's term, and is perhaps the most apt, since it implies "play" between the two parts of the text as partners in a textual "game" (ludus signifying both play and game), even though, again, it also marks the passages as not really a part of the text, but as only "interludes."[14] The least biassed term is perhaps "italicized passages" because, although "passage" again implies a kind of non-status, the

---

[14] This is, of course, apt only in the context of a critical discourse which likes to see textuality as "game."

term tries to depend solely upon the typographical nature of this part of the text, its only unquestionable, one may suppose, characteristic.

The second part of the text consists of passages in roman type. These passages are set apart in quotation marks and tagged each time with "[a character] said." These are often referred to as the "speeches" or "soliloquies" or "monologues." James Naremore, in The World Seen Without a Self, examines labels given to these "speeches." He explores the possibilities of "speech," "interior monologue," "stream-of-consciousness," "stylized quotations from the minds of the characters," or of some kind of "soliloquy." All of these, Naremore discovers, have some justification in the text, but all are also unjustified because oversimplified. Naremore restricts himself to the term "speech," and, having discussed the various possibilities for naming, does not attempt to come up with his own "label." His most convincing conclusion, in fact, is that "it is easier to say what the convention is not than to say what it is" (Naremore 152-3).[15]

The Waves, then, consists of two distinct subtexts, both of which defy any more than a very limited description,

---

[15]Guiguet also notes the tendency for the text to invite restricted interpretations. He writes of the "speakers" that

> the obvious conclusion to be drawn is that they are soliloquizing, and most if not all critics have promptly assumed that The Waves is composed of six interlaced interior monologues. This definition is a tempting one because it is short and simple — too short and too simple to sum up so complex and so dense a work. (Guiguet 282)

and that based only on the typographical nature of those subtexts—typeface and quotation marks. Naremore provides a strong and quite comprehensive study of the various theories about the nature of these "speeches" which need not be repeated; however, I would like to examine briefly the basic argument against some of the labels which have been applied to the text in order to show how they restrict it and attempt closure. One of the earliest critics, Bernard Blackstone, says of the first series of "speeches,"

> These are the first impressions, the fruit of the immediate contact of senses with phenomena. The word 'said' does not of course refer to spoken words; these are inarticulate sense-perceptions. As the book goes on, we find that the things 'said' are often unconscious; they represent the life which goes on beneath the surface of direct communication. (emphasis added) (Blackstone 168)

Blackstone recognizes that the "said" is problematic; nothing is actually "said." He postulates, instead, that the "speeches" are "inarticulate sense perceptions" being, of course, somehow articulated. This remark relates to Woolf's attempt to "record the atoms as they fall" (Woolf, "Modern Fiction" 155), seeking an art form, a language that will articulate sensation as such. There seems to be a conflict, however, between the idea of "inarticulate" and the notion that the "speeches" are "often unconscious." This suggests, and it is a possibility put forward by the text, that the "speeches" may at times be conscious. Blackstone does not explain what he means by "unconscious," but his statement suggests the possibility of conscious, inarticulate sense perceptions. This seems a contradiction; if one is recording

sense perceptions in the mind of a character, surely consciousness in that character is a complication. What does it mean to say that consciousness might be inarticulate? Moreover, what does it mean for the "speeches" to represent "consciousness," and what does "inarticulate" mean in the context of an articulated "speech"?

There is definitely some justification to Blackstone's suggestion of sense perception. When Susan, for example, says "'I see a slab of pale yellow . . . spreading away until it meets a purple stripe'" (6), the artificiality of the phrases suggests that this is not an imitation of the thought pattern of a child; this is not Susan's conscious thought. The "speech" records her visual sensation. The first "speeches," in fact, seem a realization of Nietzsche's definition of language:

> The "Thing-in-itself" (it is just this which would be the pure ineffective truth) is also quite incomprehensible to the creator of language and not worth making any great endeavour to obtain. He designates only the relations of things to men and for their expression he calls to his help the most daring metaphors. A nerve-stimulus, first transformed into a percept! First metaphor! The percept again copied into a sound! Second metaphor! (Nietzsche 178)

This theory of the process of language is quite apt for the first "speeches" in The Waves. The children do seem to be articulating in some way—in actual language if Nietzsche's theory holds—their visual and audial sensations, their perception. These are, in a Nietzschean manner, transformed into metaphor in the attempt to "designate" the experience of relating "reality" to themselves. Metaphoric explanation

is introduced very early, in Louis's "'great beast,'" as if to demonstrate the inescapability of metaphoric structures as basic to language.[16] In this way, then, the "speeches" are seen as a language, as the characters' linguistic articulation. How, then, do the "speeches" represent the inarticulate or the unconscious? Blackstone's interpretation does mark an important characteristic of the "speeches," but it does not explain the sense of inarticulate and unconscious which it does mention.

Other critics also tend to bypass the problem of the "unconscious" nature of the "speeches." Daiches calls them "inarticulate consciousness. . . . highly formalized rendition of consciousness, . . . symbolic masks" (Daiches 110). Bennett calls them "solitary consciousness, the reception of experience" (Bennett 111). Both try to deal with the complexity of the "speeches." Daiches sees them both as consciousness and as mask; Bennett, as consciousness and sensation. There seems to be a conflict about whether, on the one hand, a character/voice can be so "conscious" of all sensation and, on the other, whether a mask can be a "consciousness." As Friedman states, "In The Waves the elaborate system of symbolic masks is enough to blot out consciousness almost entirely" (Friedman 209). The seeming simultaneity of artifice (mask), consciousness, the unconscious, and sensation causes conflict in readings and cannot be readily explained. Critics have difficulty reconciling their

---

[16] See Chapter Four for a closer examination of the first "speeches."

response to the text as "the psychic life of the speakers" (Graham 96), as "pure being: the hidden life" (Blackstone 165), or as a "look through . . . conscious minds into the depths of [the] soul . . ." (Johnstone 357), with the artificiality of the convention. They desire, like Boone, a meaning, finite and graspable, not a tension or plurality of meaning in which all is possible. Daiches finds that it is too formal to be actual "stream-of-consciousness." Humphrey examines it as such, as "the purest psychological analysis" but notes its difference from "the two earlier stream-of-consciousness novels" (Humphrey 14). As such critical commentary shows, the question of consciousness in The Waves is complex; however, it is the presence of the problem, of the question, which makes the labelling of these "speeches" difficult. There is no ready way to describe them; attempts to close the text on one reading with one label fail.

Just what the nature of the characters' voices is, for example, is uncertain. As Collins says:

> point of view in any recognizable traditional form does not exist. . . . The six "voices" that make up the novel are not engaging in soliloquy at either a conscious or a sub-conscious level. (Collins 9)

Collins argues that there are no individual voices/consciousnesses, but only six parts of a "comprehensive life identity" (Collins 9). This idea likely comes from Woolf's own statement that the characters are one.[17] Freedman says

---

[17] "The six characters were supposed to be one" (Woolf, Letters IV 397). This has been a debated point throughout the critical history of the book. Many critics attach

that The Waves is "patterned on a chorus of individual voices which in turn blend into a single 'objective' voice, that of a formal narrator" (Freedman, Virginia Woolf 126). Poresky describes the characters by means of the wave metaphor as both united and individual, coming together and dissolving, moving "from psychic wholeness to psychic disintegration" (Poresky 190). These statements, however, do not fully investigate the part narration plays in the tension between the one and six "characters." Freedman's statement does, however, recognize that perhaps this one voice is the narrator's, whoever that may be, even though he does not really explain what he means by "blend." Graham and Naremore both come closer to a theory concerning the narrative involvement in this question. Both of them recognize as a justification for the one character theory, the fact that all the "speeches" seem to be "spoken" in a uniform style. Guiguet says that "these are not voices, in the sense that they are not differentiated" (Guiguet 283). Graham, discussing the "impression of close self-scrutiny" and the

---

[1]'(cont'd) themselves to the possibility of one character/one voice: Richter says that the characters "represent different aspects of a single androgynous being . . . various facets of the imagination" (Freedman, Virginia Woolf 21). Harvena Richter also says that

> in The Waves, Virginia Woolf takes the self of a single being, ultimately represented by Bernard, and slices it into six sections which personify, on a varying number of levels, the conscious and unconscious selves and drives within the human personality. (Richter 120, see also 247)

She uses Bernard's statements "there is no division between me and them" (195), and "I am many people" (187), for support. These statements do suggest a unity of character, but disunity is also signified in the text. "We became six people at a table in Hampton Court" (187), etc.

use of the "pure present," mentions the "aura of the mediating mind" (98). He explains, for example, that Susan's present awareness of immediately past actions

> becomes, through the uniformity of style, not only her own but also that of an invisible narrating consciousness closely resembling the speaker of lyric poetry, . . . (Graham 98)

Graham connects this "narrating consciousness" to what he calls the "translator" whose presence is known only from the tags. Graham posits the presence or "aura" of this mediating "translator" who

> appears explicitly only in the use of the word 'said,' which implies that someone is reporting the speeches, and in the interludes, which do not occur in the mind of any character and so must either be interpolations by an omniscient author or direct reflections by the translator as he turns away from the characters and examines the world around them. (Graham 98)

Graham is ackowledging, of course, a narrative feature of the text which many critics ignore. It is easy to discuss the "speeches" of/by the characters as the whole text, but one must not forget that there is some voice narrating these "speeches," saying the "said." The recognition of this voice complicates interpretation, but also provides some explanation of the problems in discussing the "speeches." As Guiguet remarks, "to define that voice is to solve the whole problem of The Waves" (Guiguet 284).

The discovery of the narrating voice may explain the problems in describing the "speeches," but it cannot provide easy interpretation. Definition of this voice is perhaps impossible. The narrator's presence can, however, explain

why it is so difficult to determine the status of the "speeches." The narrator is a force behind the "speeches" which selects and arranges them. Naremore points out, in his argument against stream-of-consciousness as the structuring narrative technique, that the duration of the "speeches" does not match the duration of the events inscribed in those "speeches" (Naremore 170). The two seem, but are not, simultaneous. There is some process of selection and summary determining just what each character "says." This is the editing of the narrator. The "speech" of each character is not in a style appropriate to that character; the style or voice is uniform because it is the language of the narrator who is, as it were, putting words in the mouths of the characters, but his/her words, not theirs.[18] The narrator articulates, in the name of the characters, then, their experience, be it articulate or not, conscious or not. The tension created by what seems to be both conscious and unconscious thought is explained by the presence of the narrator who articulates all aspects of the character's thought and reduces them to an equivalence so that sensation, perception, and imagination, thought and communication are all expressed in the same way. All that is expressed of the characters is thus neutralized, as it were, and expressed with the language and metaphors of the narrator. This, then, would explain the repetition of images/-metaphors by different characters[19] as well as the sometimes

---

[18] His/her because the narrator is only an ungendered voice.
[19] One example of a repeated image is the "arrows of

black and white characterization in the "speeches," for example, the "mythological" treatment of the female speakers.[20]

However, recognition of this narrator will not lead one to a clear interpretation/understanding of the text. To posit this narrator is to posit a distorting force in the text, but it cannot provide vision through the distortion, cannot decipher, as Boone wants, the complications of the text. In fact, positing the narrator may only be another means of naturalization, of trying to find a simple answer to its problems. The danger lies in forgetting that, despite the one narrator, there are still six distinct "characters" with some actual, although obscure, function. McConnell writes of the tendency to read the characters as six facets of one personality — the "'six sided flower; made of six lives'" (154):[21]

> we must not confuse the gestalt-narrative with either lyricism or allegory; we must not assume, with Jean Guiguet, that the monologues of The Waves are a sustained single voice only factitiously differentiated by character names, or, with Dorothy Brewster, that the six characters are a code for different aspects of a single massive human personality. Both interpretations, which end by more or less totally 'subjectivizing' the book, fail to take account of the range of complexity and phenomenological subtlety of the grouping of the six. (McConnell 123-4)

---

[19](cont'd) sensation" mentioned by Bernard and Jinny, and the "arrows" of Rhoda.

[20] See Chapter 3

[21] Compare this to the flower of the first dinner: "'A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many petalled, red, pure, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves—a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution.'" (85)

McConnell is afraid that, by focussing on the single voice, the ways in which the six characters do function as six will be ignored, that the subtle, but significant differences will be overlooked. One must not dismiss the voices of the six because of the mediating presence of an obscure narrative voice. The narrator only mediates; s/he does not obliterate.

An unrestricted reading of this text must account for both possibilities. Since either theory is to some extent justified—there is a narrator (the "one" character) and there are six characters—both need to be acknowledged as functioning significantly in the text. The voice of the text is both the characters' and the narrator's; there is no distinguishing since it functions as both. This and other apparent tensions or contradictions amount to a plurality. There is no single reading since all aspects of the text, all possible interpretations exist simultaneously. To choose one reading is to deny another equally significant, equally productive reading. If Naremore feels that "it is easier to say what the convention is not than to say what it is" (Naremore 152-3), this is perhaps because he desires the convention to <u>be</u> one thing. It is not that the conventions of the text are <u>not</u> all those things the critics want to label them as, but rather that they <u>are</u> all those things at once. Each critical reading has support from the text but not as a single reading. Each/every possible interpretation is anticipated by the text, inscribed in it, but no <u>one</u>

interpretation holds firm. Each is undermined by the presence of another. For example, the "speeches" can be called "conscious" or "unconscious," but because of the opposition of these predicates, the text posits both and denies both. A tension exists because of this refusal to allow closure on one predicate. Consequently, any discussion of the text which desires resolution is frustrated.

This frustration is, of course, due to the desire/need to naturalize the text according to traditional conventions. For example, when a reader sees the word "said" followed by quotation marks, she assumes, according to her knowledge of conventions, that some character, whose nature is again understood in terms of convention, is saying, speaking some thing, most likely to some one. When a text like The Waves refuses to cooperate with such an assumption, the reader may be frustrated, and interpretation confused. Because critical discourse depends so much on the application of traditional conventions to new texts, describing the new in terms of the old, it is not unreasonable that The Waves should elicit so uncertain a corpus of critical commentary. In conventional terms, this text has no recognizable or characterized narrator, no authoritative voice, no characters, no action or plot, and no really determinable setting. Certainly there are suggestions of all of these in the text. There is some "thing" one might call a character, some/several description(s) one might call setting, even though the relation between character and setting is uncertain, and there is a

function for which one can posit a "narrator." However, because of the eccentric nature of that text, all of these labels are only functions of a critical naturalization of the text.[22] Without such labels, admittedly, criticism/-commentary must be silent, but the limitations of that critical discourse in dealing with such a text ought to be acknowledged.

What then can be said about The Waves if one is not to remain silent? There is, after all, much to say about so plural a text. Certainly, acknowledgement of the difficulty of critical discussion is a first step. Before one can attempt to talk about a text like this, one needs to be aware of the inadequacy of the traditional critical tools one is using to explain/describe textual phenomena which explicitly work to defy convention. The two major problems are the inapplicability or restricting/closing nature of available critical language and the refusal by the plural nature of the text to such restriction. One cannot assume that a critical language is totally adequate for this text, and one must be careful not to assume, as Boone does, that there may be one graspable meaning. The Waves is not so much an object to be examined as it is a process to be entered into. If the difficulty for critical commentary arises out of the lack of an appropriate language, that is, if it

---

[22] Michael Boyd describes The Waves as "the most intense critique of realism to find expression within the reflexive mode. Through a process of reduction, The Waves dissolves each of the traditional aspects of fiction—plot, setting, and, most thoroughly, character" (Boyd 9).

arises out of the fact that the available critical language is based on conventions this text overturns and defies, then perhaps the goal in an investigation must be to test that language and reform it in order to deal with the problems that The Waves poses.

The difficulty of dealing with such a plural text is the need to recognize all the possibilities which the text puts forward. One must be careful to avoid ignoring some aspects of the text in order to decide upon an interpretation, as critical differences about this text demonstrate. What I intend to do in the next two chapters, is to examine the way traditional conventions of characterization and of realism are used and abused/undone by the text. I want to show how the text makes use of conventions, offering the reader a possible means of interpretation only to refuse any handhold by undermining convention. I intend to observe the game which the text plays with its reader and to demonstrate specific ways in which the text of The Waves involves itself and the reader in a constant process of deconstruction.

III. The Question of Character and Characterization

In The Waves, Woolf plays with the reader's expectations about character. There are many ways of defining character, and of reading character, which Woolf exploits in this text. The question of character had long been one of her preoccupations. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," she writes:

> Mr. Arnold Bennett says. . . . that it is only if the characters are real that the novel has any chance of surviving. Otherwise, die it must. But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality? ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 97)

The question behind the essay is not only what and who makes a character "real," but more, fundamentally, what is character, and what is the process of characterization. Woolf broaches the subject not because she would posit an answer, but because she would ask the question. In The Waves, as I have pointed out earlier, the process of characterization is complex, which makes naturalization of the text complex as well. There are many ways of reading character in The Waves, various processes of characterization and, consequently, various types of character.

Ignoring the notion that there may only be one character/voice, one can identify seven major characters in The Waves who merit careful study: the six speaking voices and Percival. Any other names and figures act solely as agents of the fictional world in which the characters exist and which they create in their perception and description. So, the woman writing at Elvedon is solely the creation of

Bernard's speech (which is not to say that she is not as "real" as he, for they both exist in the text by virtue of his speech) and she functions in the novel only in relation to that episode and as part of the characters of Bernard and Susan. Such character-agents are the context in which the seven major characters exist, just as the plumber or horse-dealer illuminates Bernard,[23] supports his existence because they are his world — a world not of objects (which would conform with Arnold Bennett's technique of characterization), but of subjects who interrelate and create each other.[24] The Waves, then, consists of six speakers, Percival, and anonymous supporting cast.

The six speaking characters are easy to label as significant actors (rather than agents) because they act or speak ("Bernard said," "Susan said" and so on). Percival has a singular status in the text because, although he never speaks, he cannot be dismissed as a minor supporting agent. He is not an object; the speakers concede to him subjecthood. He is too much involved in the lives and actions of the speaking characters. More than a support which only provides context, he is a determining factor or influence in their lives. Percival has, in fact, been described as the "symbolic center around which the characters of The Waves are marshaled[sic]" (Freedman, The

---

[23] "'But I only come into existence when the plumber, or the horse-dealer, or whoever it may be, says something which sets me alight'" (89).

[24] Actually one might consider these characters as objects of the speakers' perceptions.

Lyrical Novel 246-7). Percival is a unifying force because he is mutually perceived and created by all the six together. According to Shulamith Barzilai:

> In his capacity as externally focalized mythic object, Percival is unlike any other object in the novel which accentuates the differences among the minds focused on it (for example, the mirror). His presence — unbounded by the limits of time and space or by the fact of his physical death, for he exists in the minds of the others only — serves as a focal point where the minds of all six characters meet and merge. Cross-focalization is achieved as all six consciousnesses interpenetrate and share the same experience through the person of Percival. Thus, Percival embodies the novel's central paradox and master device, the principle of unity in diversity, which is re-enacted at the level of narrative structure by collective multiple focalization. (Barzilai 236)

This statement involves a number of questions in the text which are brought out by the differences in characterization between Percival and the six speaking characters. Barzilai describes the essence of this difference in terms of Percival's external focalization, that is, the fact that he is characterized solely by the speeches of the others. However, Barzilai makes a distinction on the basis of this which may be questioned. She states that because Percival is so characterized, he is therefore "unbounded by the limits of time and space." But to what extent are the speaking characters bound by time or space?[25] There is no construction of an actual space or time of the speaking. Similarly, the speakers are, like Percival, also

---

[25] Thomas Docherty writes that "in Virginia Woolf, as in many others, temporal as well as spatial distance between characters is annulled (the clearest example of the spatial in her work being The Waves, and of the temporal Orlando)" (Docherty 142-2).

characterized by their speeches and only exist beyond those speeches in the act of speaking. So, although Percival and the six do seem fundamentally different, they are all developed by the same speech, in the same act of narration, and exist in the same fictional world. Percival does, as Barzilai comments, exemplify the process of cross-focalization which affects the characterization of all seven — that they are created by each other and exist solely in each other's perception and description. He does embody paradox, but more than Barzilai points out. Percival, as a highly physical character in terms of his relations to the others in their fictional world, and because of his non-speaking status, as distinct from the realm of language, provides a good example of the tension Woolf creates in her characterization. Percival is both the most physical of the characters, defying language, and, at the same time, the most constructed and artificial of the characters since he is silent and only presented through the language of the others.

Percival's artificial nature is underlined by his name and heroic role which link him to the literary tradition.[24] According to Robert Scholes, the traditional character of

---

[24] Percival is referred to as hero in the novel by Bernard.

> "Here is Percival. . . . He is conventional; he is a hero. The little boys trooped after him across the playing-fields. They blew their noses as he blew his nose, but unsuccessfully, for he is Percival. Now, when he is about to leave us, to go to India, all these trifles come together." (82-3)

Later, imagining Percival in India, Bernard even says, "'He rides on; the multitude cluster around him, regarding him as if he were — what indeed he is — a God'" (92)

Perceval marks the entrance of the developing character into Western narrative.[27] Scholes writes that "the most significant development — a feature of both Chretien's and Wolfram's treatments — is the presentation of Parzifal as a developing hero" (Scholes 167-8). Perceval holds an important place in the history of character and is used by Woolf as a representative of the tradition. Although silent and undeveloped in The Waves, Percival is linked to literature by more than his role as hero. He is the judge of Bernard's stories and, as Neville says, "'it is Percival who inspires poetry'" (27).

Perceval is, of course, one of the medieval heroes who were successful in the quest for the Holy Grail. He represents two important aspects of traditional narrative. First, he is the perfect pure man with desirable traits.[28] This is obvious even with the first mention of Percival in The Waves. Neville says:

> "Now I will lean sideways as if to scratch my thigh. So I shall see Percival. There he sits, upright among the smaller fry. He breathes through his straight nose rather heavily. His blue and oddly inexpressive eyes are fixed with pagan indifference upon the pillar opposite. He would make an admirable church warden. He should have a birch and beat little boys for misdemeanours. He is allied with the Latin phrases on the memorial brasses. He sees nothing; he hears nothing. He is remote from us all in a pagan universe. But look — he flicks his hand to the back of his neck. For such gestures one falls

---

[27] Perceval is a knight of Arthurian legend who rode in quest of the Grail. I distinguish between the Perceval of the legend, and the Percival of The Waves.

[28] Despite the satiric note in Neville's speech that Percival would make an "admirable church warden" for less than conventional reasons, he still looks to Percival as someone to imitate.

> hopelessly in love for a lifetime. Dalton, Jones, Edgar and Bateman flick their hands to the back of their necks likewise. But they do not succeed." (24)

Louis remarks shortly after this:

> "Look now, how everybody follows Percival. He is heavy. He walks clumsily down the field, through the long grass, to where the great elm trees stand. His magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander. A wake of light seems to lie on the grass behind him. Look at us trooping after him, his faithful servants, to be shot like sheep, for he will certainly attempt some forlorn enterprise and die in battle." (25)

Despite their different attitudes towards him, Neville's reverence and Louis's jealousy, they both recognize Percival's heroic status as innate and inevitable. Percival is introduced as a literary figure and all description of him by the six speaking characters supports this role. Furthermore, because he does not himself speak, there is nothing in the text to suggest that he is anything other than the traditional character of Perceval. He is given no individuality, no character other than would fit the role.

He represents a second aspect of the tradition as well: faith in meaning and closure. Perceval is, of course, a finder of the Grail; he succeeds in the paradigmatic quest, completing it. This completion of the quest can be compared to the retrieval of meaning. The quest, as a traditional structuring motif in literature, exemplifies the search for meaning and closure. Belief in the quest, in the accessibility of meaning and in completion with the signified, as well as the traditional expectations of the hero, are incorporated into the character of Percival. He is very much, what

many critics label him, a symbol.

Having constructed Percival thus, as a symbol of the tradition, Woolf proceeds to undermine him and so overturn that tradition. She does this by not allowing him to fulfil the destiny his character assumes. Percival dies, as Louis predicts, but not in battle, not romantically in keeping with his romantic role. His is a mock-heroic death — "'He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown'" (101) — a meaningless, unliterary death. The death of the hero, moreover, does not have the effect it should by literary standards. The world does not end with it and Woolf does not end The Waves with Percival's death as convention might demand. She defies expectations by allowing the fiction to continue without him and thus belittle his death, the death, in fact, of all Percival represents. She makes the hero insignificant and reveals his artificial nature by doing so. That is, Percival's meaningless death reveals how any meaning he might have had was imposed upon him by the speakers who describe him. In fact, his death is mock-heroic only because he is seen as a hero. As Louis remarks, "'he died in Egypt; he died in Greece; all deaths are one death. . . . Life passes'" (114). The characters mourn him and then find that life does go on despite the finality they might feel with the loss of their hero, their central focus. The Waves demonstrates the non-finality of Percival's death by refusing it any finality. Just as life goes on for the speakers, to their surprise, so does the fiction continue

for the reader. The traditionally significant event is made insignificant to all reading Percival's character, both speakers and reader. Percival's death does mark the end of that tradition, the death of the traditional character.[29]

Percival, then, is characterized in a very different way than the speakers (beyond the fact that he never speaks). He is typecast as Perceval. Simply by providing a name, Woolf has provided a ready-made character, replete with traits and a destiny which, were this a novel appropriate to his traditional nature, Percival should fulfil.[30] By typing him in this way, Woolf makes use of traditional methods of characterization as a demonstration of what she is acknowledging and attempting to surpass in her work. Percival is a character, closed and complete, and predictable in so far as he is characterized by his name. Woolf is interested not so much in character, the product, but in characterization, the process. She is not content to fill her text with names, counters, but instead plays with the fact of such counters. By giving Percival the allusive name, Woolf presents him to the reader as a convention to be

---

[29] It is interesting to note that Percival is a very minor character in the first draft of the novel and only takes on the role of dispensible tradition in the second draft when Woolf makes the stylistic break from the traditional narrative of the first. With Percival, she incorporates that very rejection of the tradition into the final draft.

[30] With regard to Percival as a name, note Bernard's reaction to Percival's death and his method of defying grief:

> "Further, this is important; that I should be able to place him in trifling and ridiculous situations, so that he may not feel himself absurd, perched on a great horse. I must be able to say, 'Percival, a ridiculous name.'" (104)

read as such.[31] She uses the tradition, Perceval, and the reader's expectations of that tradition, the predictable reading of Percival, because she prefers to break with predictability and to involve the reader in the process of characterization rather than provide products for the reader's consumption.[32]

Percival also provides another aspect of characterization in The Waves. In addition to "naming" Percival, Woolf characterizes him through contrast with the six speakers. Percival is a foil and in this capacity is quite different from his conventional figure. Woolf creates a tension between Percival the construct, very artificial and literary, and Percival the being, the character who escapes language

---

[31] It is interesting to note Woolf's comment remarking upon this technique:

> What I now think (about The Waves) is that I can give in a very few strokes the essentials of a person's character. It should be done boldly, almost as caricature" (A Writer's Diary (April 9) 153).

Docherty describes the effect of this kind of naming:

> if the name, replete with all its potential significances, comes first . . . , then we may say that the character, in metaphysical senses, is "dead". In this case the character is merely a function in a plot, labelled before the enactment of that function and with a totally limited potential for change or development. The author, in so naming a character, confers an entire "life" upon the character in its plot-function; the character loses the illusion of subjective being, and is an object to be manipulated under the shaping hand of its creator, the author of the plot. (Docherty 49)

[32] Barthes distinguishes between the readerly, which he calls classic (Barthes 4), and the writerly. "The writerly is ourselves writing" (Barthes 5). The Waves may be considered a writerly text on account of its involvement of the reader. By leaving gaps, narrative discontinuities, by failing to provide an authorial/interpreting voice, Woolf requires that the reader fiil the authorial role, to reconstruct the fragmented text, and so to write it.

and defies art. By doing this, Woolf is further refusing closure of character. Percival is a paradox, being both the typed representation of tradition and closure, and also an example itself of non-closure, of the refusal to be read as one thing.

This complication of Percival's character involves the sense of the physical which is associated with him. Woolf sets up a comparison between Percival and the speakers with respect to the awareness of body as contrasted to self-consciousness about language. Percival is offered as a standard of physicality by which the other characters can be measured. His presence provides him with authority in the eyes of the others who see him as a judge of authenticity, as a judge of story and character.[33] This trait is introduced, as with the characterization of Percival as a type, with the first mention of him. Neville remarks upon Percival's physical presence, his straight nose and heavy breathing and most notably his gestures which are so major a trait to him that others imitate them (24). Louis likewise notices Percival's clumsy walk and his heaviness (25), both of which suggest substance and mass. The other characters all respond to Percival as a physical presence. Neville says, "'And then we all feel Percival lying heavy among us'" (26). Percival's introduction in the text emphasizes his physical nature in

---

[33] Percival's presence asserts his reality and so makes him a standard for judging just how realistic a story might be. He is a literary judge by traditional standards which fits in with his function as a representative of literary tradition.

contrast to the other characters. That is, he is physical to the extent that they notice it in comparison to themselves. Furthermore, the characters allow Percival authority — he can judge them — on the basis, it seems, of this physical superiority (a superiority which exists only because the "inferiors" perceive it in him).

Percival has power by virtue of his "body" and that power is placed in opposition to language. When Bernard attempts to tell a story, Percival is the one who judges him. There is a conflict between Percival's physical power and Bernard's literary or linguistic power in which body and language are opposed. Neville describes the occasion of Bernard's defeat:

> "I detect a certain effort, an extravagance in his phrase, as if he said 'Look!' but Percival says 'No.' For he is always the first to detect insincerity; and is brutal in the extreme. The sentence tails off feebly. Yes, the appalling moment has come when Bernard's power fails him . . ." (26)

Subsequently, Louis attempts to "fix the moment" in language despite Percival's power:

> "This [the moment] I see for a second, and shall try tonight to fix in words, to forge in a ring of steel, though Percival destroys it, as he blunders off, crushing the grasses, with the small fry trotting subservient after him. Yet it is Percival I need; for it is Percival who inspires poetry." (27)

What Louis does "fix," does note, is the tension or paradox that Percival should be involved both with physical presence and with poetry or language. This opposition between physical presence and language which is brought out in the conflict between Percival and Bernard, is centered around

Percival. He is both non-linguistic, non-speaking substance, and also, Mrs. Brown-like, the essence of poetry. The physicality which Percival embodies is at the very foundation of the question of the reality of character. By combining physicality, as a kind of realism, and artifice in the one character Woolf is exploring, even with Percival alone, characterization as a major part of her reformation of novelistic tradition.

Bernard is another example of Woolf's complication of the process of characterization. Percival represents traditional conventions and presence beyond language; Bernard introduces the problem of the narrating character, the self-conscious artist figure who would oppose the traditional, as represented by Percival's status as a convention. Bernard and his relationships with other characters illuminate, far more specifically than Percival, the processes of characterization in The Waves.

Bernard articulates both his status as character and as a story-teller, creator of characters. Early in the text, his story-telling is obvious. Bernard uses language to shape and control his world. He is aware of this creative power in language — that he can affect his relationship to his world through language. Going off to school, for example, he uses language as a means of creating an appearance with which he can handle the occasion. He says, "'I must make phrases and phrases and so interpose something hard between myself and the stare of housemaids, the stare of clocks, staring faces,

indifferent faces, or I shall cry'" (20). Bernard fears the faces because their stare, the perception of others, has the power to characterize him. They see him and so know him. Bernard must use language and create an image for them in order to control who he is, because who they think he is affects his identity. He will not let them know/characterize him by his fear. As a result of this defence, Louis sees Bernard and describes him as composed and easy (21). Bernard has thus created an aspect of his reality with language. He acts already as an artist. However, he does so to protect himself from another powerful form of characterization — the perception of others. This is the most obvious form of characterization in The Waves, what Barzilai calls "collective multiple focalization." That is, each of the six voices through which the text is focalized, perceives and describes the world, itself and the others.

There are, then, six perspectives on each character which create it. Each character works to create and read itself and others. This occurs at both the level of the fiction for the character and at the level of the text for the reader.[34] Bernard fears how others will read him, but he also acknowledges that he exists by virtue of the same reading. He "comes into existence" (89) in the presence of others. This, at the level of the fiction, is because he

---

[34] I distinguish between fiction and text such that Bernard is considered as a "real" person in the "fiction", and as construct/character in the "text". The level of fiction involves questions of fictional content; the level of text involves questions of textual style.

exists as a story-teller and needs an audience to fulfil his role. He says,

> "I need an audience. . . . I need eyes on me to draw out these frills and furbelows. To be myself (I note) I need the illumination of other people's eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is myself." (78)

But there is more to this statement than the need for audience. Self is being treated here as something which is variable, which <u>does</u> change as a result of external influence, and which does depend for its existence upon that external perception and influence. Bernard is not independent and individual, but recognizes that his self, his being, is social.

> "What am I? I ask. This? No, I am that. Especially now, when I have left a room, and people talking, and the stone flags ring out with my solitary footsteps, and I behold the moon rising, sublimely, indifferently, over the ancient chapel — then it becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many. Bernard, in public, bubbles; in private, is secretive. That is what they do not understand, for they are now undoubtedly discussing me, saying I escape them, am evasive. They do not understand that I have to effect different transitions; have to cover the entrances and exits of several different men who alternately act their parts as Bernard." (51)

He has a being outside of the room, the social setting, but it is one created by that setting. His character/self is made up of various roles determined by others. When he is alone, he is "'traversing the sunless territory of nonidentity'" (78). "'Solitude is[his] undoing'" (147). This is, of course, Bernard's attitude toward self and identity at the level of the fiction, as he sees himself. On another level, of the text, as the reader sees Bernard, these statements

also concern Bernard as a character in that text, as the object of cross-focalization, as a creation of the narrative.

Several other statements by Bernard also remark upon character and the possible forms of characterization. Early in the text he mentions his biographer and introduces the notion of life as writing. Bernard <u>is</u> written. In the last "chapter," Bernard "sums up" his life to the "unknown person" in the restaurant.

> "The illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed. This, for the moment, seems to be my life. If it were possible, I would hand it to you entire. I would break it off as one breaks off a bunch of grapes. I would say, 'Take it. This is my life.'" (161)

What Bernard wants to do is to treat his life, his self as something solid and whole, "complete." He would treat himself as a traditional character, not complex, not many, but singular and <u>closed</u>, in the terms of Percival's traditional status. However, Bernard also recognizes, as Woolf does, that this is not a realistic treatment of person. Bernard defies closure as a living self and distinguishes between the real, himself, and what can be known and transmitted by language, character. The only way he can characterize himself to his listener is to tell a story or many stories despite their inadequacy. At a textual level, this is also true of Woolf's methods of characterization. She refuses to provide complete, closed characters, but tells stories, provides a plurality of Bernards as seen by all the speakers and as acted out by him. Bernard's character, then, performs

on these two levels: fiction and text. What he says about himself as a person in the fiction also says something about him as character in the text.

This dual function of Bernard's speeches also involves the narrative. Bernard is, of course, the narrator of his own stories and in terms of his attitude toward reality, a creator of his own world. However, Bernard is also implicated in the narration of the whole text of The Waves. The narrator of the interludes and of the tags of the speeches (who may or may not be the same) is completely unknown throughout most of the text. But in Bernard's summing up, he makes a statement which ties his speech directly to the language of the interludes.[35] Describing the world seen without a self, he says,

> "So now, taking upon me the mystery of things, I could go like a spy without leaving this place, without stirring from my chair. I can visit the remote verges of the desert lands where the savage sits by the camp-fire. Day rises; the girl lifts the watery fire-hearted jewels to her brow; the sun levels his beams straight at the sleeping house; the waves deepen their bars; they fling themselves on the shore; back blows the spray; sweeping their waters they surround the boat and the sea-holly. The birds sing in chorus; deep tunnels run between the stalks of flowers; the house is whitened; the sleeper stretches; gradually all is astir. Light floods the room and drives shadow beyond shadow to where they hang in folds inscrutable. What does the central shadow hold? Something? Nothing? I do not know." (197)

This is a precis of the interludes starting with the first where sunrise is depicted as a woman raising her lamp. That

---

[35] Kelley notes this and writes that Bernard's speech "overflows into the interludes that divided the oneness of The Waves" (Kelley 197). Naremore also notes the similarity of the speech to the interlude (Naremore 187).

Bernard should say this, complicates the narrative. If, as this suggests, Bernard is the narrator of the interludes, he thus creates, in part, the very world of the fiction in which he exists as character. He becomes author to himself.[36] For, of course, the interludes do provide, more than any of the speeches, description of that fictional world. They provide a space in which the reader can place the characters. And, although there is no other explicit connection between the interludes and speeches than this statement by Bernard, it is easy for the reader to naturalize a connection, read the interludes as the world of the characters since no other world is provided.[37] It is significant that it is Bernard who is given this statement and involvement in the narrative since he is otherwise characterized strongly as an artist figure.

Bernard is, and is opposed to Percival as, an artist, who exists by language as a character, and for language as a would-be artist. Throughout The Waves, Bernard's speeches show his interest in language and writing. He has, most obviously, his notebook in which he collects phrases which he would use to tell the story, his story, his life. He does this even as a child, an extension of the story-telling which already characterizes him.

"Their antics [the masters'] seem pitiable in my

---

[36] That Bernard should be narrator is not conclusive. Note the final italicized line of the text. Despite the connection to the interludes, Bernard is still narrated in his speech by some narrator who provides tags and quotation marks, and who frames the speeches with the interludes.
[37] See note 63 for Blackstone example.

> eyes. I note the fact for future reference with many others in my notebook — a fat book with many pages, methodically lettered. I shall enter my phrases. Under B shall come 'Butterfly powder'. If, in my novel, I describe the sun on the window-sill, I shall look under B and find butterfly powder. That will be useful." (24-5)

Bernard, as artist, originally has faith in the connection between language and reality, signifier and signified. He desires, on the basis of this belief, to tell the true story, to present life. But his stories usually fail. He does not finish them because language will not take him that far. He gradually questions the possibility of stories.

> "I have made up thousands of stories; I have filled innumerable notebooks with phrases to be used when I have found the true story, the one story to which all these phrases refer. But I have never yet found that story. And I begin to ask, Are there stories?" (126)

> "But which is the true story? That I do not know. Hence I keep my phrases hung like clothes in a cupboard, waiting for somone to wear them." (147)

At the end of the text, Bernard claims to abandon language.

> "My book, stuffed with phrases, has dropped to the floor. It lies under the table, to be swept up by the charwoman when she comes wearily at dawn looking for scraps of paper, old tram tickets, and here and there a note screwed into a ball and left with the letter to be swept up. What is the phrase for the moon? And the phrase for love? By what name are we to call death? I do not know. I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak. . . . I need a howl; a cry. When the storm crosses the marsh and sweeps over me where I lie in the ditch unregarded I need no words. Nothing neat. Nothing that comes down with all its feet on the floor. None of those resonances and lovely echoes that break and chime from nerve to nerve in our breasts, making wild music, false phrases. I have done with phrases." (199)[38]

---

[38] It is interesting to note that Louis first mentions the "'little language such as lovers use'" (96), a label which might refer to the kind of language which Jinny uses or

Of course, Bernard does say this with language and continues to speak for another page or so. He has not abandoned language, but he has perhaps lost his innocence, his faith in the signified. Yet, his story is told. There is a tension between Bernard's final denial of language and his continued use of it in his speech. He cannot really deny it for he is language, existing by it. Neville comments about Bernard's stories earlier in the text:

> "We are all pellets. We are all phrases in Bernard's story, things he writes down in his notebook under A or under B.. He tells our story with extraordinary understanding, except of what we most feel." (47)

Woolf remarks here upon an inevitable characteristic of language and text. That is, to communicate a story, the writer seeks closure, uses counters (or pellets in Neville's words),[39] and the reader naturalizes closure; there is a belief in the signified, in meaning. (In order to say anything about Bernard, I must believe I understand him.) Simultaneous with the acknowledgement of this belief as naive — there can be no phrases and Louis cannot fix the moment — is the fact that all this is always already written. Bernard, denying language, keeps on speaking. Only Percival, whose closed character depends upon language, is silent as he represents a silent reality. Of course, Bernard's attitude toward language and his use of it need

---

[38](cont'd) which Susan would use when she says, "'To his one word I shall answer my one word'" (66).

[39] Note Rhoda's statement: "'How you snatched from me the white spaces that lie between hour and hour and rolled them into dirty pellets and tossed them into the waste-paper basket with your greasy paws. Yet those were my life'" (138).

not be the same. He comes to understand the inadequacy of language, but as artist still speaks.

Bernard, with his attachment to speech and his acceptance of its power of characterization, is contrasted to Rhoda who, like Percival, defies language. However, Rhoda cannot conquer language, cannot, like Percival, defeat Bernard by exposing the artifice of his story. Rhoda fears language and characterization because she has no power with it, as Bernard has, nor power against it, as Percival has. She recognizes, as Bernard does when he goes off to school, that the perception of others characterizes, but she cannot put up any barriers and is thus vulnerable to external control. That is, having, at the level of the fiction but not of the text, no ability to characterize herself, she is seen through, known and created by the others. She cannot, as Bernard does, create and act out various roles for various situations, but is at the mercy of those situations. One point of comparison is the reaction of Bernard and Rhoda to "'staring faces.'" Bernard puts up a defensive wall of language; Rhoda, defenceless, tries to escape. Two important examples demonstrate this: Percival's dinner and the scene with the mirror.

At the dinner given for Percival, Rhoda enters, intimidated by being seen. Neville notes her fear of recognition, of being seen. Rhoda compares herself to Jinny and Susan, remarking that she is faceless but "'Susan and Jinny change bodies and faces'" (82). Rhoda has no power

over her own appearance and so over her own character as Jinny and Susan do who can, like Bernard , alter their appearance as a defence in each new situation. Rhoda is vulnerable because she is not in control of herself in time, not free to act of her own free will because she has no will. She cannot move of her own free will in time because time is, as the episode in the schoolroom demonstrates, understood in a symbolic system which is beyond Rhoda's comprehension — she is "'blown for ever outside the loop of time'" (15). Helpless, afloat in time, then, she is pinned down as a character by others, being unable to stand by her own power as Bernard does in the face of the others, and so made vulnerable to the understanding of, and therefore characterization by, others.

> "If I could believe," said Rhoda, "that I should grow old in pursuit and change, I should be rid of my fear: nothing persists. One moment does not lead to another. The door opens and the tiger leaps. You did not see me come. I circled round the chairs to avoid the horror of the spring. I am afraid of you all. I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do — I cannot make one moment merge in the next." (87)

Rhoda fears the perception of others because it offends the integrity of her self-known character. It defies what Bernard calls her "authenticity." He notes that she, and Louis, "'exist most completely in solitude . . . resent illumination, reduplication'" (78).

This fear of reduplication, which is what the perception by others is in terms of crossfocalization or the combining of perspectives in one character, is introduced

with Rhoda's reaction to the mirror..

> "That is my face," said Rhoda, "in the looking glass behind Susan's shoulder — that face is my face. But I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world. The things they lift are heavy. They say Yes, they say No; whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second. If they meet a housemaid she looks at them without laughing. But she laughs at me. They know what to say if spoken to. They laugh really; they get angry really; while I have to look first and do what other people do when they have done it." (29)[40]

Rhoda's difference from Bernard is articulated here. She dislikes the mirror because it creates another image of her, one she cannot possess. She is paranoid about such external perspectives. The housemaid will laugh, Rhoda feels, because she sees Rhoda and thus controls her, whereas Jinny and Susan have faces, identities the housemaid cannot control and must therefore respect. This is Rhoda's attitude, afraid of how others see her because she fears there is nothing to see. Jinny and Susan can stand up to external perception; they know what to say and do, what role to play. And, most importantly, they create that role. Rhoda does act; she imitates what they say and do, how they dress, because she does not understand how to create her own image, to characterize herself. Consequently, by mimicking them, she must become something dependent upon them, created by them, not by herself.

---

[40] Rhoda sees the world of Jinny and Susan as real because they have faces; with faces, Jinny and Susan can initiate action, whereas Rhoda can only imitate.

This is all on the level of the fiction. At the level of the text, Rhoda is successful at characterizing herself and others. She is not silent like Percival; she does use language. Rhoda's depiction and the method used to depict her are opposed. Whereas in the fiction Rhoda is outside of language, unable to use it because she does not understand the symbolic, in the text she does use language and does more than imitate the others; she can speak, can initiate meaning. This marks the difference between Rhoda and both Bernard and Percival and so draws attention to their relationships to language. Rhoda articulates what Percival cannot. Her fear of recognition, of externalization, is a fear of being typed, used like Percival as a counter. Her fear of this, then, reveals how Percival really is characterized. He has no control over his character since he is silent. What the reader knows of him is only what is externally perceived. The result is a closed character, a counter. This is what Rhoda fears.

For both Rhoda and Percival, as "'authentics'", there is a distinction between self and character.[41] Rhoda seeks to save her self by fleeing characterization. Percival's self and character are separated; he maintains his self by keeping silent and spurning the power of language. The reader only has access to language; Percival's "self" is an unknown which can only be assumed. Rhoda is a failed

---

[41] Louis is also, of course, an "'authentic'" who feels a need to assert his self, his "I" in language, to present his self in his character by means of signature.

Percival because she will not accept external characterization because she fears it, believes in it more than in her self and has no power over it. Thus Rhoda supports by comparison Percival's position among the characters as they are measured against each other. Similarly, Rhoda helps emphasize Bernard's dependence on language. Her fear of language and its power makes significant Bernard's obsession with language. And she draws attention to the power of characterization by cross-focalization. What Rhoda fears in the fiction is what occurs in the text and what provides the basis of Woolf's characterization, the layering of perspective through the speeches.

Revealing this opposition of Percival and Bernard is not, of course, Rhoda's sole function in the text. However, the way she brings out aspects of Bernard and Percival exemplifies the characterization of all the speakers. The technique of cross-focalization, the multiplying and crossing of perspectives involves a great deal of comparison of those perspectives. This comparison reveals similarities among the characters, supporting their united status as aspects of a single universal character, and differences, which distinguish them and reveal their functions as individuals. The difference between Bernard and Rhoda with respect to language is extreme. This contrast makes a more significant distinction that develops in the characterization in The Waves. This is a difference between the natures of the male and the female characters, and a

difference in the ways they are characterized.

One noticeable aspect of this gendering of the characters is the mythical treatment of the women according to the elements earth, fire, and water. Part of this, too, is the attachment of certain colours to the female characters. These associations appear early but are fully developed only with the maturity of the women. Jinny is the first to be stamped by her colour. In the first scene, she sees "'a crimson tassel . . . twisted with gold threads'" (6). Susan sees a green ring, and Rhoda sees white. The males also see colours in this scene, but throughout the text no specific colours are associated with them. Jinny, however, is predictably gold and red, fire colours; Susan, green, the colour of nature; and Rhoda, blue and white, colours of water. Jinny has a collection of attributes which associate her with fire: her colours and repeated images depicting her passionate nature.

> "I dance. I ripple. I am thrown over you like a net of light." (9)
>
> ". . . for winter I should like a thin dress shot with red threads that would gleam in the firelight." (23)
>
> "Look, when I move my head I ripple all down my narrow body; even my thin legs ripple like a stalk in the wind. I flicker between the set face of Susan and Rhoda's vagueness; I leap like one of those flames that run between the cracks of the earth; I move, I dance; I never cease to move and to dance." (28)

Such statements continue to appear in Jinny's speeches. Moreover, they overflow into the speeches of others. Susan describes Jinny "'as if on some far horizon a fire blazed,'"

and compares herself to that, thinking of "'damp grass, with wet fields,'" and weather as protection against Jinny's laughter with its "'tongues of fire'" (81).

As Jinny's with fire, so Rhoda's character is developed with images of water, from the basin in which she floats her petals, her ships at sea, to the puddle which she cannot cross, and the sea. "'Into the wave that dashes on the shore, into the wave that flings its white foam to the uttermost corners of the earth'" (111), Rhoda makes her offering to Percival. She is like the garland that she throws, afloat, and powerless on the waves. She says,

> "I am like the foam that races over the beach or the moonlight that falls arrowlike here on a tin can, here on a spike of the mailed sea holly, or a bone or a half-eaten boat." (88)[42]

Rhoda's images work to support her traits of helplessness and her lack of self-control in characterization. But the images do more than support; they characterize. There is far too much repetition of images with all three women to be dismissed as minor. The effect is a "mythologization."

---

[42] Another valuable quotation here is the one describing Rhoda in Spain, which foreshadows her suicide:

> Flowers only, the cowbind and the moonlight-coloured May. Gathering them loosely in a sheaf I made of them a garland and gave them — Oh, to whom? We launch out now over the precipice. Beneath us lie the lights of the herring fleet. The cliffs vanish. Rippling small, rippling grey, innumerable waves spread beneath us. I touch nothing. I see nothing. We may sink and settle on the waves. The sea will drum in my ears. The white petals will be darkened with sea water. They will float for a moment and then sink. Rolling me over the waves will shoulder me under. Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me." (139)

Irma Rantavaara points out the allusion to Shelley's "The Question" (Rantavaara 40).

This myth aspect is most obvious with Susan who becomes characterized as nature goddess, earth mother. Her association with the colour green, her attachment to the country, and her domesticity develop this. But specific statements confirm the myth-making. Susan says,

> "It is still early morning. The mist is on the marshes. The day is stark and stiff as a linen shroud. But it will soften; it will warm. At this hour, this still early hour, I think I am the field, I am the barn, I am the trees; mine are the flocks of birds, and this young hare who leaps, at the last moment when I step almost on him. . . . — all are mine. . . . But who am I, who lean on this gate and watch my setter nose in a circle? I think sometimes (I am not twenty yet) I am not a woman, but the light that falls on this gate, on this ground. I am the seasons, I think sometimes, January, May, November; the mud, the mist, the dawn." (65-6)[43]

Susan becomes, for the reader as well as for the other characters, a symbol of all that is natural and fertile, all associated with the female. Bernard says,

> "It was Susan who first became wholly woman, purely feminine. . . . She was born to be the adored of poets, since poets require safety; someone who sits sewing." (167)

Susan becomes, like Percival, an ideal. Percival is also the object of poetry, as one who inspires it. This similarity between Susan and Percival marks their status as Character, as literary construct, as the substance of language. As Percival represents, through a very literary technique, heroism and the masculine, so Susan represents the traditional feminine. She becomes, because of the literary association of the myth — after all, the images are only understood because

---

[43] Also: "'I shall lie like a field bearing crops in rotation; in the summer heat will dance over me; in the winter I shall be cracked with cold.'" (88)

of the literary tradition from which they come, — a literary character, like Percival, rather than a realistic one. [44] That is, the artifice of her characterization unveils her status as character, as a construct of the text; her unreality is not masked, hidden in order to create the illusion of reality. The characterization of Susan, as with Rhoda and Jinny, is too obviously a construction, a myth-making or representation of an ideal, to allow for the term realistic. Like Percival, but not perhaps to that extreme, they are types, typed, created by a method of characterization, the continuous, unsubtle layering on of images and associations, which makes no attempt to hide the process, to cover up the workings.

Although, as speakers, the female characters do have equal involvement in the process of cross-focalization, they seem more characterized than characterizing as a result of this "mythologization". This is not to say that the characterization of the males is not laid bare by the text. Bernard constantly draws attention to his created status by referring to himself as a character, as a collection of roles, as a biography. However, Bernard is also constantly creating and characterizing others as an artist, as a language user. The women do not have this. They are not, as the three speaking males are, obsessed with language and the difficulties of expression. Neville and Louis, like Bernard, can be described as artist figures. Part of their

---

[44] Susan is characterized as natural, which conflicts with this artifice, just as Percival's physicality does.

characterization is their awareness of language as they use it. Neville, as poet, is contrasted to Bernard, and Louis, as failed artist (having abandoned art for the business), is compared to both in terms of attitudes toward language. All three characters are caught up in the problems of language and creation as artist/creators. Neville describes himself as a "'clinger to the outsides of words'" (32). He is a reader of language, playing among the "'well-laid sentences'" of the classics, and questions his own status as poet (56, 59). For Neville, this is an important question about his identity, his character. Language is central to that character. For Louis, too, identity is linked to language.

> "I have signed my name," said Louis, "already twenty times. I, and again I, and again I. Clear, firm, unequivocal, there it stands, my name. Clear-cut and unequivocal am I too. Yet a vast inheritance of experience is packed in me. I have lived thousands of years. (112)

Louis relies on language. And, fearing it like Rhoda, needs to control it. As a child he fears the characterizing power of his Australian accent and will not speak until he can imitate Bernard. An "authentic" like Rhoda, he fears the penetration of his self, and must protect his integrity with a mask, imitating rather than initiating an appearance. The business world provides him with a power over language, signing authority (in terms both of signature and signification). That is, he can mark his self, his presence in language with the signature, "I".[45] This "I" becomes his

---

[45] Compare Louis's attitude toward "I" and presence to the

armour, a form of protection which Rhoda cannot have because she cannot use language. Louis thus imposes himself rather than have language impose upon him. He is concerned with the relationship between self and language and makes the connection between unequivocal expression and unequivocal self. He and language are intimately linked. Similarly, Louis links himself to history, to tradition, as the product of that tradition. As a character, of course, the whole literary tradition of character has gone into his making. As a self, as Louis, he sees himself as similarly constructed.

Both Neville and Louis are concerned with language and expression as Bernard is.[46] The speaking male characters of The Waves are all dependent upon language for and in their characterization. They are language-users and that is the essence of their being, just as Bernard is defined as story-teller and Percival as hero. The women, however, have not this dependence.[47] They are concerned with expression,

---

[45](cont'd) "present" male figure, "I," of Professor von X or Mr. A in A Room of One's Own.

[46] Bernard describes Louis's attitude toward language: "'Louis, glancing, tripping with the high step of a disdainful crane, picks up words as if in sugar-tongs'" (46). This is very similar to Susan's response to word's as "'stones,'" but Louis does use words.

[47] I believe that there is explicit gender stereotyping in this text as a part of Woolf's attempt to reveal the disadvantaged status of women with respect to writing and artistic expression. Bernard has been called androgynous (see, for example, Sypher, "The Waves: A Utopia of Androgyny?"), but I feel that this suggestion is certainly not carried through in the text. The basis for this theory seems to be Bernard's line, "'But, "joined to the sensibility of a woman" (I am here quoting my own biographer) "Bernard possessed the logical sobriety of a man"'" (52). Because Bernard says this so self-consciously, it cannot be read as unmotivated. Moreover, the statement implicates Bernard in the traditional stereotyping. He

but from the outside. Their interest in language is as individuals who do not have the access to language that the men do. Their schooling does not priorize language and literature as the classical education of the males does; the women know little or nothing of Catullus or Lucretius and their well-laid sentences. Instead, they remain alienated from such language. Rhoda, most obviously, finds language foreign, unable to enter into the symbolic and understand. In the schoolroom she cannot complete the arithmetic problem because the symbols are only figures to her. She says, "'I cannot write. I see only figures'" (14). She cannot make sense of the symbolic and is so kept outside of language. She says later, "'"Like" and "like" and "like" — but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?'" (110).

Like Rhoda, Susan also sees language concretely, as stones. "'Those are white words,' said Susan, 'like stones one picks up by the seashore'" (14).[48] She feels restricted by language because she can only use words as counters, like stones, being "'tied down with single words'" (11). Susan is tied to the object, limited to the signified, to the

---

[47](cont'd) attributes "'sensibiliy'" to women, and "'logical sobriety'" to men, so that, rather than suggesting androgyny and the fundamental unity/equality of the sexes, the statement actually asserts sexual division. Androgyny, as the opposite of sex division, as the assertion of sexual sameness, has a part in the text only in terms of the view that there is one character made up of the others, perhaps Bernard, in which case Bernard is to be seen as he unity of all six and so of both male and female.

[48] This is similar to Neville who sees language concretely, but he sees sentences, not stones, and recognizes that "'speech is false'" (93).

reality. Bernard, by contrast, can "'slip away'" because he understands the activity of the signifier, understands language and can escape the desire for reference, the need for language to function, to be real. This is not to say that he does not need reality as a model; he needs the real, but knows that language is not a vehicle for it. To desire a model is not to require that language correspond to that model. Susan, however, does need this correspondence; this is exemplified in her treatment of the calendar.

> "I have torn off the whole of May and June," said Susan, "and twenty days of July. I have torn them off and screwed them up so that they no longer exist, save as a weight in my side." (36)

Susan demands an intimate connection between symbol and referent; by tearing off the calendar days, she is tearing up the time she so hates. Susan invests symbols with the power of the real in the manner of word-magic where words are invested with magical power over reality.[49] Susan's desired cache, where she "'will make images of all the things [she] hate[s] most and bury them in the ground'" (30), is reminiscent of voodoo-like practices. This is Susan's use of the symbolic, a primitive use. She has not yet broken away from the real. Language for her is a magical tool over which she has not sufficient power. She says later,

> "I love with such ferocity that it kills me when the object of my love shows by a phrase that he can escape. He escapes, and I am left clutching at the

---

[49] This is similar to Louis's belief in "I," but Louis has power, has a signature, a practically powerful symbol. These similarities between Susan, and Louis and Neville result from the characteristic obscurity of The Waves, its refusal to make the characters clear and distinct.

> string that slips in and out among the leaves on the tree-tops. I do not understand phrases." (89)

She does not understand them because she cannot escape with the signifier, but, lacking any power over language, is limited by her belief in the priority of the signified.

Jinny, similarly, has no power over language, but only the ability to communicate non-verbally. She speaks through her body and needs no other means for her purposes. Caught up in her own dance, her self-expression, she "'cannot follow any word through its changes'" (28). Instead she finds another way. In society she says all she needs to physically.[50]

> "Like lightning we look but do not soften or show signs of recognition. Our bodies communicate. This is my calling. This is my world." (68)

With her body she accepts and rejects, says "'Come,'" says "'No.'" Her body and its signals, its language, are all she knows and feels she needs.

None of the women in The Waves have the same access to language or relationship to language that the male speakers do. These are potentially creative women — Susan is productive; Jinny, expressive; and Rhoda, imaginative. However, they are not artists, do not have the opportunity to succeed with the struggle of expression; they are women.[51] This difference has a major impact on the characterization of

---

[50] Jinny is very much like Percival in this sense; both are physically powerful in their relationships with others.

[51] This is not to say that the women do not have the ability to create (the woman writing at Elvedon demonstrates that they do), but that they do not have the outlet, are not given the power to create.

Rhoda, Susan, and Jinny. They lack power over language, lack the ability to create their world as know it. Instead they must accept that world and their roles in it as they are created for them. They can speak, of course; they are involved in the multiple focalization. However, this does not mean that they have a language which they can control or use creatively. What and how they speak is determined by men because the language is owned and affected by the male according to his perspective. When the women do speak, then, they must use a language which is controlled by men, its function being to express a male view of the world. That is, the women have no power over language; the men, in their struggle with language as demonstrated by Bernard and the others, do understand language better and have power to manipulate it. The consequence for women of having to use a language from the male perspective they are offered, is that they are forced to talk about themselves, to characterize themselves in male terms, with words and images created by men. For example, Susan describes herself in conventional terms because she does not have the power to create a different image of herself. The women end up not characterizing themselves so much as being characterized by language, not as they see themselves but as men see them, with such terms for description as the language they use provides. They are objects of a language with which only men create, not subjects themselves, creating themselves as they would. They cannot be subjects because they have not been

taught how to create their world with language, only how to accept a world and a character created for them. The result is the "mythologization" previously examined. The women become typed according to tradition because those types are incorporated into the very language which creates them.

This characterization of the women as objects is not subtle. Woolf lays bare the process of mythologization through the insistent repetition of images, through the explicit stereotyping (Susan as earth mother), and through the significant absence of linguistic expression and artistic self-determination for the female characters. This differentiation of characters by sex reveals Woolf's awareness of the techniques of characterization. She actualizes and draws attention to the ways in which the women are stereotyped through such traditional methods, pushing those methods to an extreme. By distinguishing between the males and females to such an extent she can demonstrate the activity/process of characterization. Woolf uses the mythologization of the women and the stereotyping of Percival to lay bare the traditional devices and language which result in characters who are either closed and silent, or powerless in the creative use of language. Woolf points out the consequence of traditional characterization and plays with the process so that she can go beyond those restricting methods and create for herself a method appropriate to the modern text she desires, one which actively and constantly questions the conventions it uses,

working to exceed boundaries and undermine the restricting/closing presuppositions about character.

IV. The Question of the Realistic

Woolf's method of characterization is caught up in her questioning of realism and, moreover, in her questioning of reality.[52] In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," she discusses her notion of character and opposes it to the tradition which she makes Arnold Bennett represent. Woolf states in this essay that she (or rather her created narrator) believes that novels are written for the sake of character, "that men and women write novels because they are lured on to create some character" (90); she points out that this is Bennett's belief also.[53] Where she differs with him is in the method of characterization and in the assumption of realistic standards. Bennett demands that "the characters be real." Woolf questions his appeal to the real by asking, "what is reality?" This question stands behind/within the textual play of The Waves. What Woolf does in The Waves is investigate realism and reality and react to the presuppositions of the Bennett attitude. Aware of the "Bennett reality," she uses it and undermines it in her overturning of traditional novelistic techniques and concepts. Woolf's use of the "character" Percival is an example of the way she offers the reader a familiar device only to lay bare its arbitrariness. All characters need not

---

[52] Realism and the realistic have two senses here: the first being the philosophical belief in an external objective reality, and the second, the faithful representation of the real in literature; Woolf questions both.

[53] The figure of Bennett should be read perhaps not so much as of the actual man, but, rather, as a target Woolf characterizes and sets up for her own purposes.

be Percivals; all novels need not be "realistic," nor perhaps need all realisms.[54] "Reality," of course, is a problematic term, one which Woolf refuses to define. One might, however, infer the nature of a Woolf's attitude concerning the real model for literature in her description of the nature of Mrs. Brown. This is the figure who ever eludes the artist, who can never be grasped.

> Some Brown, Smith, or Jones comes before [most novelists] and says in the most seductive and charming way in the world, "Come and catch me if you can." And so, led on by this will-o'-the-wisp, they flounder through volume after volume, spending the best years of their lives in the pursuit, and receiving for the most part very little in exchange. Few catch the phantom; most have to be content with a scrap of her dress or a wisp of her hair. (90)

Mrs. Brown, in fact, might be considered the signified of the characterizing text, a perpetually elusive "presence," because the real person cannot be presented in language, only an unreal character. This elusiveness is represented in Percival, a "presence" which is not enclosed in the closing structure of the character. That is, Percival's essence, his Mrs. Brown-ness, defies the language which constructs him as a closed character. In this way, Woolf's realism, as suggested in Mrs. Brown, acknowledges the impossibility of mimesis in character, of actually representing the totality of Mrs. Brown, or of capturing the presence of Percival (which other characters describe him as having, but fail to capture), and acknowledges that the real which Bennett requires for the survival of the novel cannot be had. This

---

[54] I use the term "realistic" throughout this discussion to denote a traditional standard as represented by Bennett.

is Woolf's relation to the real, her realism—a recognition of the irreducibility of the real. Woolf demonstrates this in The Waves by defying the novelistic regulations (for such they are if Bennett requires them as necessary to the novel's existence) assumed by Bennett's "realistic" technique which results from his definition of realism.

Bennett provides "reality" for his character by providing a World. Woolf analyses Bennett's technique and points out that "he begins to describe, not Hilda Lessways, but the view from her bedroom window" (101). Woolf mocks him by suggesting that he puts more emphasis on the house than on the character within. She says that "he is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there" (103). Bennett's method, as Woolf sees it, is to provide reality for the character by providing a detailed, realistic world, by giving it a house to reside in, a reality to supposedly be "real" in. This technique, though described by Woolf in extreme terms, is not unusual. Traditional novels often contain narrators who explicitly lay out the setting, the background, in or against which the characters are to exist and the events of the plot take/have place. Setting, locale, milieu, whatever the term, is a standard device in the novel.[55] It is upon this device, in her dispute with Bennett's style, that Woolf stakes realism. Bennett's character, and thus his novel, depend upon realism, and so, if

---

[55]One example of this is the "Author's Introduction" to George Eliot's Felix Holt.

Woolf assumes rightly where Bennett's priorities lie, depend upon the creation of setting, of World.

In The Waves, Woolf questions this assumption of the importance of World—of the careful creation and description of a space (World) in which to locate character. By questioning the need for a given space, representative of Bennett's realism, Woolf can question that realism and the presuppositions of the tradition whence it arises. Woolf's method is to signify various possibilities for World in the text, refusing to privilege any of them. This is not to say that some may not seem more realistic than others, but that what seems real may be undermined by the equally unreal and that any distinction is purely interpretative on the reader's part. That is, the reader decides which of the possibilities is real, privileging what the text will not. For example, the Elvedon episode can be read literally or metaphorically. These two worlds, two spaces, thus exist simultaneously.[54] They are not clear and distinct as conflicting readings demonstrate. The Elvedon episode is an

---

[54] I have argued that to read it, as Boone does, as myth is to close the text, to reduce it to an opposition of certain real and certain unreal, demanding that it must be myth or truth, demanding a clear distinction. This is the action of the reader privileging one part of the text as real in opposition to another part. In the case of Elvedon, story is an important aspect of the episode, but Elvedon cannot be reduced to only story. I prefer to distinguish between the episode as myth, which asserts a real/myth dichotomy, and mythical, by which I mean that myth, Elvedon as story, is suggested by the text, but not asserted; other factors, other possibilities, including Elvedon as real, disallow any such assertions of one thing. That is, Elvedon is both mythic and real, and so cannot be one to the exclusion of the other, as results from the assertion of it as only story or only myth, defined in limited terms.

example of how the real and unreal combine/play in the text. Elvedon is an intersection where worlds of The Waves cross/combine/play and so make interpretation difficult and closure on a single meaning impossible. In other places in the text one can distinguish more clearly between what seems real to the fiction and what does not. For example, it is fair to say that it seems realistic for the children to chase butterflies in a garden, but unreal for Louis to be rooted into the ground (9). However, the Elvedon episode and examples like it throw such distinctions into question. Which is realistic? Can one be privileged because it conforms more closely to traditional realistic standards, to the world as it is usually depicted or as we know or as we think we know it? Are there any grounds in the text for such privileging? If not, and I would argue not, then by what means can the reader be certain of a distinction which is not carried through in the text, but becomes confused, undermined by the presence of its contradiction? That is, which world, if none is privileged, is more real? And, most importantly, is such a question valid for such a text? This last question of the validity of realistic values is where the experimenting with worlds in The Waves leads.

Woolf uses the concept of world to question realism in the same way as she uses character. In her playing/experimenting with character, she demonstrates the conventionality of Percival, the closed character, and undermines it in favour of involving the reader in the

process of characterization rather than providing the reader with final products, closed Percivals. Woolf prefers, that is, to show the pursuit of Mrs. Brown rather than close upon her and acquire a closed failure (a Percival), but not her presence. Pursuit, not presence, is Woolf's goal. Woolf uses a similar strategy in her manipulation of the concept of World. She begins this process by providing the reader with a world— of sorts. The first interlude could be considered a world given by an omniscient, authorial narrator, as the setting of the scene into which the characters will enter. What it in fact does is introduce a "playground" of worlds. That is, like Elvedon, the scene of sunrise combines both what seems real and what unreal. The vision of the woman raising her lamp coincides with the realistic description of the house. By the standards of traditional (Bennett's) realism, the house is real, the woman not. However, the text does not assert such a distinction. There are no clues to suggest that the one should be dismissed as less real than the other, especially in the sole context of the interlude.

The first interlude posits a number of possible Worlds. These worlds are set up prior to the introduction of character and plot in the first speeches. Moreover, these worlds are set up independently of the speeches. There is no certain connection between the two sections, only a gap; no authoritative voice is present to explain the relationship between these worlds and the speeches by the characters. One

could read the interlude as a specific creation of setting into which the characters enter, and read the garden of the interlude as the garden of the children, but this is a matter of interpretation, of closing the gap. The two may be similar— there is in each a garden—but there is nothing in the text to signify that the gardens are one, only suggestions. They may be the same—birds chirp in each—or they may not—any garden may have birds.[57] Moreover, similarity of details between the episode and interlude disappear later in the text when the garden is left behind.

Whatever the relationship, the interlude is textually independent (in terms of typography) from the speeches and so can be considered in its own singular context. In this context, the interlude opens the text with a crossing or intersection of worlds. The first paragraph introduces two levels of signification, a possible literal and a possible metaphoric. These are initially related by simile which quickly disappears and the two levels are confused.

The sun had not yet risen.

This opening statement, apparently a specific, indicative statement of fact, is also unspecific. There may be no metaphoric complexity here, but the statement <u>is</u> complex because vague. To say that the sun "<u>had not yet</u> risen" is to

---

[57] Richardson notes the
> curiously undefined relationships among the garden described in the interludes, the garden in which the children play, and the garden at Elvedon. . . . the gardens seem distinct despite similarities, remote and separate from each other, yet somehow "inextricably involved." (Richardson 704)

say very little. It does not guarantee that the sun will rise, although it signifies, "yet," that it might. In this way the statement suggests a possibility but does not assert the fact of any event. It signifies not a presence, but an absence.[88] Thus, the very first statement in The Waves is a demonstration of how the text may undermine assertions of presence.

The second statement is equally complex in its offering of World.

The sea was indistinguishable from the sky . . .

Again, this is a vague statement. So far, sun, sea, and sky have been mentioned but not with the assertion of singular, objective existence. The sun is absent, a non-presence. And, the sea and sky are not distinct, unique elements, but are "indistinguishable." This first clause sets up a distinction between sea and sky, separate signifiers further separated by their juxtaposition at beginning and end of the phrase, a distinction which is then broken down by the signification of indistinguishable; no distinction can be made, nor can the stated signifiers be reduced to a unity. The world which is supposedly offered is also refused; no assertion has yet been made, nor graspable predicate given despite the apparently simple statements of supposed fact. Moreover, the possibility of an objective statement of fact is removed by the sense of the word "indistinguishable." A question of

---

[88] The sun may be seen to exist by virtue of the statement; however, it is conceivable, were this a story about the destruction of the world, that the sun might not rise, or even exist.

perception is introduced here. Undistinguished by whom? The term implies interpretation by some perceiver.[5] And this involvement of interpretation, questioning whether or not the sea and sky are perceptually/optically — not distinct, a term independent of an outside agent, but—distinguishable, a state determined by someone distinguishing, introduces the possibility of mediation. The description is mediated by a perceiver. A subject is involved, so objectivity is, if not impossible, problematic.

In the continuation of the text, certainty and objectivity are again undermined in the clause which follows and which introduces a comparison and so a further complication.

> The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, <u>except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it.</u> (emphasis added)

First, the "except" causes a further reversal. It qualifies the undermining of the distinction, thus making the first clause even more vague, distinguishing between the indistinguishable. This sets up a paradox; there can be no qualification of "indistinguishable" for that is to belie the term by distinguishing, no matter how minorly. The statement

---

[5] Apter suggests that the children are the perceivers.
> In the first lyric section the sea and sky are undifferentiated, for the characters are infants and cannot make a distinction; and the inside of the house, the inside of their minds, is "dim and unsubstantial." (Apter 115)

Apter recognizes the effect of some perceiver, but his theory that the children are perceiving is unconvincing. He bases his argument on the ways the interludes may reflect stages of the characters' lives. The connections are there, but to say that this is because the characters are the perceivers of the interludes is only an assumption. Payne, for example, states that the house only "foreshadows the psychological state of the characters" (Payne 211).

which follows is <u>again</u> vague. What does it mean for the sea to be "slightly creased"? What this signifies is not readily comprehensible/graspable. In fact, it demonstrates in its unclearness/obscurity, the elusiveness of the signified. The end of the phrase offers an explanation, a potential signified, which is actually only a further deferral of meaning since it provides not a signified, but another signifier, an expansion of the predicate in a simile, "as if a cloth had wrinkles in it." With the simile, a second "reality" is introduced. There are now parallelled, through the simile, worlds, one of the absent sun and uncertainly distinguished sea and sky, and one of the cloth. The space of the cloth is subordinated to the first space by virtue of the simile which further hypothesizes it with an "if." Yet what it is subordinate to is stated less clearly, less objectively. The cloth <u>has</u> wrinkles. This is the most indicative statement yet in the text, but it becomes vague through the grammatical context of the hypothesis of the simile, subordinate to the vague thesis.

The next sentence continues the distinction set up by the simile but semantically undermines it.

> Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.

The distinction continues syntactically. The two worlds introduced in simile are now parallelled in independent clauses. The subordination of the second part of the simile

is further withdrawn as "a cloth" becomes determined as "the grey cloth." The change from indefinite to definite article suggests the definition of the cloth, the assertion of its existence, and so the "de-subordination" of the second space. What before was subordinated and equated to the sea by the simile, privileging the sea with real status, is now given independent status. The spaces of sea and cloth are now equally asserted, equally existent in the text as parallel spaces.[60] This parallel is signified solely by the syntax of the sentence. Semantically, however, these two spaces are potentially confused through the metaphoric comparison resulting from the parallel.[61] It would be absurd to deny that what is predicated of the cloth makes more "sense" if transferred to the sea. The second clause suggests, but does not assert, the movement of waves in the sea, even though the equation of bars and waves is never explicit, only implied. Interpretation is again invited by the text, but no evidence by which to prove the substitution of cloth for sea is provided. Both equation and distinction of the two spaces is suggested; both signify, but neither is signified. The reader is sent off in pursuit of meaning, of closure, and this very process is echoed in the text in the image of the bars/waves pursuing each other perpetually.

---

[60] One might argue that they are always equal because equally signified in the same language.

[61] The metaphor here is not explicit. The sea is not asserted as the cloth; the metaphoric equation is a result of the parallel which demands that the reader assume the equation.

The possibility of the wave as metaphor for interpretation and the pursuit of the signified is furthered in the next sentence beginning the second paragraph.

> As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand.

Veil is, of course, a metaphor traditionally associated with interpretation.[42] Moreover, the similarity of the action of the bar/wave and the pursuit of meaning is furthered by the image of the wave attempting to cover/grasp/comprehend the sand, but undermining itself and achieving at best a veil. Nothing explicit is, as usual, ever stated. Similarly, the bar is described as water and the next statement again, grammatically for the first time, suggests equation of bar and wave, but no explicit connection is signified. The tension between grammatical distinction and semantic equation continues. That is, semantically and in the wake of the simile, the second space is subordinated to the first and equated to it, and so the first is privileged as more "real." The syntax, however, by placing the second space in independent clauses, treats that space as equally real, having equal access to subjecthood. At this stage, another

---

[42] Shelley writes "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar" (Defense). Derrida mentions it in Spurs, and, of course, the image originates in The Old Testament as the Veil of the Temple separating the physical space of the people and the spiritual space of the Ark. The image appears in Woolf criticism. Apter writes

> In The Waves Virginia Woolf shows no such vacillation in her approach to truth. Always she focuses on that mobile shroud, and her aim in this novel is to create a language in which that shroud can be explored. (emphasis added) (Apter 115)

simile introduces another image, and so another possible space, something else to be considered potentially real.

> The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper, whose breath comes and goes unconsciously.

A new space is created—perhaps. Its existence, its reality is only potential; it vies for "real" status. Possibly, this sleeper, parallelled with the wave, sleeps and sighs beneath the grey cloth as the waves move beneath the sea. Again, there is nothing explicit in the text to justify this pushing of the simile, but the consistency and logic of the comparison makes possible such an equation. Furthermore, the connection, the reading, may only seem absurd. There is little difference between the the equation of sleeper/wave and of bar/wave. The parallels are set up similarly. Only the proximity of the parts of the first equation make it seem more valid, although simile does involve subordination of the sleeper to the wave; yet the sleeper is potentially as real as the wave. One critic, Blackstone, suggests that the sleeper is in the house of the interlude and is, in fact, Bernard. [63] However, there is nothing to signify this connection in the text; this is an example of the involvement of interpretation as it is invited by the text. That is, without a stated connection, the reader is invited to provide one, to bridge the gap left in the text.

Possible worlds are multiplying in the text, and the space which seems the real center, of sea, sky, and sunrise,

---

[63] Blackstone writes: "Inside, the children are sleeping, like the waves" (Blackstone 167).

competes with the alternate spaces set up in metaphor/-simile. The woman raising her lamp in the second paragraph becomes an integral part of the sunrise. In fact, it is only through her, through interpretation/assumption of the equation of spaces, that the reader might decide that this is a sunrise. The text only signifies the activity of the woman. Thus, in terms of the text alone, the woman has more real value than the inferred sunrise. There is nothing other than the reader to determine the unreal nature of the woman, if in fact she is unreal, once the description is in full play. The woman signifies, the sun is still absent and not signifying. The woman is, admittedly, introduced in simile, but the extension of the simile, the expansion of the description confounds that simile. In the last half of this second paragraph the previously separated predicates of the distinct worlds are crossed and combined; all are thus given equal status, as existing simultaneously. For example,

> Gradually the fibres of the burning bonfire were fused into one haze, one incandescence which lifted the weight of the woollen grey sky on top of it and turned it to a million atoms of soft blue. The surface of the sea slowly became transparent and lay rippling and sparkling until the dark stripes were almost rubbed out.

The bonfire and woollen sky are reduced to the space of a single verb; similarly, the sea and the stripes are brought together in the same phrase. Previously, the stripes were of the cloth and no explicit link was made between cloth and sea. Now the element of one is transferred to the other, making an equation, confirming the simile, and confirming

the earlier interpretion which linked the two parts of that simile. However, that link is also undermined and the simile dis-confirmed in this example with the description of the "woollen grey sky." This suggests that the sky is to be equated with the grey cloth, not the sea, and so confounds the comparison by asserting both (and perhaps also equating sea and sky through the two equations, that the cloth is both, thus un-distinguishing them again, re-asserting that they are indistinguishable). The effect of this is to confuse the spaces of the two worlds, to disallow any easy distinctions, any easy equations, any easy determination or interpretation of what is.

The "sunrise" or lamprise is a complication of worlds and signifiers, and so seems unreal because treated neither indicatively nor objectively. These are not clearly statements of fact. The next and final paragraph, by contrast, seems to offer that objectivity, a world, a reality.

> The light struck the trees in the garden, making one leaf transparent and then another. One bird chirped high up; there was a pause; another chirped lower down. The sun sharpened the walls of the house, . . .

The description, like the leaves, seems transparent in comparison to what came before. The statements about the birds are simple and indicative—no metaphor, no confusion. Moreover, they set up the dimensions of a space —high up, lower down—and so of a world. The house provides another realistic element, if one is to follow the realistic standards Woolf attributes to Bennett. The house is an

"objective" signifier with traditionally "real" value, in contrast to the woman and the lamp.[44] The sun, signifying its presence for the first time, sharpens the walls, illuminates reality. It is as if before the sun arrived there were no vision and so no illumination or articulation of anything real. Yet, light also brings shadow and distinguishes, makes objects distinct, real or shadow, real or unreal. The next clause in the text marks this, and complicates it.

> The sun sharpened the walls of the house, and rested like the tip of a fan upon a white blind and made a blue finger-print of shadow under the leaf by the bedroom window.

The fan tip links back to the sunrise, thus involving this supposedly clear text with the metaphoric confusion of the former. But, more interesting here is the equal treatment by the illuminating light (the signifying light?) of both house and shadow. The "blue finger-print" owes its being to the light just as the house walls do, and so is as defined, as objective, as real.

> The blind stirred slightly, but all within was dim and unsubstantial.

With the description moving from the sharpened walls to the equally sharpened shadow, that shadow, the "blue finger-print," is made substantial by the defining light and then contrasted to the interior, the substance of the house,

---

[44] See previous note for Blackstone quotation in which he suggests the children sleeping are like the wave which is "sighing like a sleeper." A relationship between this sleeper, who is only hypothetical in the simile, and the house, asserted later, is thus implied. Which, then, is the more real part of the first simile: sleeper or wave?

which is "dim and unsubstantial." By signifying the real as shadow, and making the shadow real, Woolf confuses the two and undermines what would be, were this the traditional, "Bennett-ian," novel, the realistic foundation of the illusion, the world in which characters can be called real.

The whole interlude, as I have tried to demonstrate, works to undermine the assumption of the real, offering possible realities, only to undermine them and so withdraw the signification of the real. The interlude may be read as the offering of a world, interpreted/selected from many, for the fiction; it may be dismissed totally as a metaphoric purple passage whose purpose is as yet vague; or its plurality may be accepted as overture awaiting further clarification in the text (a clarification which Woolf refuses). Whatever the case, there is no closed, realistic world given in this textual beginning, only confusion and rejection of realistic standards; mimesis falls apart when the distinction between real and unreal is reduced by the text. The first episode, then, opens in the aftermath of this confounding of the real. In the episode's uncertain relation to the interlude, realism is again questioned. Is the interlude to be dismissed as unreal in the face of this new, apparently realistic text? The episode is, that is, in roman type, which suggests that it has a different status, and, more importantly, it consists ~~of~~ speeches in quotation, direct speech, supposedly representing speech, assuming the reality of a speech act. Quotation marks, conventionally, assert the

reality of their contents, that something was said. The Waves, of course, later undermines this convention by calling into question the status of the "speeches" as actual speech, spoken text, but at this early point in the text, the first episode, this questioning has not yet developed, although the seeds of it are present in the unchild-like nature of the children's statements, and the quotation marks can be seen to oppose the interlude and to signify the possibility of the real. Yet even as the fact of the speeches may seem more real, there is no world posited in which they may take place, no context provided outside the speeches themselves. If the interlude is to be abandoned because it offers too many conflicting but simultaneous worlds, then what is to be made of a speech which stands alone in the text, unsupported by any context? One can choose to cross the gap between texts and apply the spaces of the interlude to this empty space, or one can construct a world out of the statements themselves, a mediated world.

That this world is meditated and must be constructed is important. Because all details by which this space is built to fill that gap between the speeches are filtered through the minds of the characters, the possibility of realism, of an externally objective foundation for the illusion is lost, and so realism in its epistemological sense is questioned. Only the interlude might be seen to provide some objectivity, the house of Bennett's realism, but even it is mediated by some perceiver implied by the text. The process

of constructing a world from the speeches is similar to the creative/characterizing activity of those speeches. What they create is an image of the world as it is perceived and which might conflict with the reality which is unknown and only assumed. That is, the world is as vulnerable to the speeches as Rhoda's character is, and as the nature of all three women in the face of a characterizing language are. The assumed reality is subject to the language by which it is described and so is known only in terms of that language. The world as it is accessible is always already language, just as Percival or Bernard is always language by virtue of the creating text.

The first episode shows the attempt by the speakers to articulate experience at a very basic level. The descriptions are not of reality, but of the sensation of reality (of phenomena). The statement moves from subject, "I," to sensation, "see"/"hear," to the object, mediated by the sensation.

> "I see a ring," said Bernard, "hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light."
> "I see a slab of pale yellow," said Susan, "spreading away until it meets a purple stripe."
> "I hear a sound," said Rhoda, "cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down."
> "I see a globe," said Neville, "hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill."
> "I see a crimson tassel," said Jinny, "twisted with gold threads."
> "I hear something stamping," said Louis, "A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps."

The statements are not consistent expressions. For example, Bernard says he sees a ring, interpreting a shape. Susan sees

only undefined slabs of colour. Rhoda hears a sound and imitates it, but makes no attempt to identify or to label it. Neville, by contrast, sees a shape, a globe, but then locates it against "the enormous flanks of some hill." This is a major change from the earlier phrases. Neville names the hill, thus interpreting his sensation of it, and distinguishes its "flanks," a "metaphoric" interpretation/-imposition.[55] From here on, the interpretation of experience becomes metaphoric.[56] Jinny's crimson tassel is neither undefined colour nor unspecific shape; she names it. Louis's statement marks the most radical change. Thus far, all the statements have seemed "realistic" statements of fact, mediated and subjective, but supposedly correct articulations of experience. Louis, however, leaps from his experience of a sound to the image of the great beast's chained foot stamping. This seems an extreme statement in contrast to the earlier ones. His seems unrealistic. Yet, all have equal status in terms of the language; all are equally interpretations of experience. Neville's assertion of the hill is no more realistic than the image of the beast. Moreover, the possible assumption that what Rhoda hears is a bird, though linking back to the birds of the interlude, is not more likely; within the context of the episode, these birds do not signify, and the relation of

---

[55] "Flank" is defined in the OED as the side of a hill, etc.; however, the OED does note that this is a "transferred use."

[56] For a more extensive examination of the metaphoric nature of the language in The Waves, see Apter, 111-32.

interlude to episode is too uncertain to make the inference certain. The distinction between Louis's statement and others is false. It is only a more extreme version of the same thing, a mediated expression of sensation.

With this example and other seemingly unrealistic statements like it, Woolf pushes the process of language she is imitating in order to reveal its basic non-referential status. That is, none of these statements has an external, objective reference; all are emanations of an interpreting mind. Realism is denied because reality (real reference) has no part in the process. The inaccessible real is interpreted by the speaker through the process of language and then this is further interpreted by the reader seeking to reconstruct that inaccessible world, to pursue it as the signified of the speaker's language. The statements which transform impressions into language are like metaphor. They signify but do not provide meaning because they only change one significant impression into signifier and so defer meaning, demonstrate difference. The language is not the meaning; it is only an aspect of the search for meaning, for the real. Realism, the belief in the accessibility/knowability of an objective reality, is lost to language because of this process. If the real, in Woolf's terms, is the elusive Mrs. Brown, the phantom signified, then it will never be present, only pursued, and the literature will never be realistic. In these terms, character will never be real for the house cannot be. It can only signify, never provide a

signified, never capture Mrs. Brown.

Signification, the positing of signifiers and pursuit of an ungraspable signified, is fundamental to narrative. Woolf reveals her apostasy to the religion of meaning and Realism by demonstrating that all language is narrative. That is, she reduces all expression to story. The stories may differ in nature, as Bernard's certainly do as both fiction and description,but they are all told, all narrated — because that is how language acts. The Elvedon episode is not a fiction for Bernard; it does differ from his created stories, but it is nonetheless narrated. Bernard makes use of his narrative skills, of devices inherent in the nature of language in order to express, to describe his experience. His life becomes story, his biography. Sensation, as the first scene demonstrates, is narrated through language, both "realistically" or indicatively and figuratively in simile and metaphor, in the same style and with the same language as any fiction. Sensation and imagination are expressed or actualized with the same medium and are so equally accessible to the mind that states or reads them. Woolf confuses real and fictive, draws a fine line between the two in order to demonstrate this, in order to show that the real is always mediated in language and so is no different, once expressed, from the unreal; only through interpretation by some mind can any distinction be made.

Reality becomes a question of interpretation because of the mediation of language. When Woolf asks, reacting to

Bennett, "What is reality?," she posits a question, not an answer; she does not anticipate an answer. Bennett and the tradition assume the real or a definition of it. Woolf does not define; she simply questions because there is no answer. To answer "What is reality?" is to attempt to grasp the signified, to assume meaning. Woolf does not do this. She may put forward a number of possibilities, but asserts none. In this way she can signify without assuming a signified. She leaves to the reader this assuming/interpreting activity, and makes the reader aware that this activity is an attempt to close the text. Woolf provides no illusion, only gaps which the reader must interpret/cross, and in the process acknowledge that leap. This is the nature of the problem of the text; interpretations differ because so much is left up to the reader. The Waves is explicitly plural, explicitly readerly. It puts forward questions, not answers, involving the reader in that questioning activity, and so carrying the reader beyond the confines of arbitrary reading conventions, which would close the text, to a recognition of the possibilities available for the novel, with which this text experiments.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Apter, T. E. Virginia Woolf: A Study of her Novels. London: Macmillan, 1979.

Barthes, Roland. S/Z. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

Barzilai, Shulamith. "The Knot of Consciousness: The Waves." Hebrew University Studies in Literature 7 (1979): 214-44.

Bell, Carolyn Wilkerson. "Parallelism and Contrast in Virginia Woolf's The Waves." Philological Quarterly 58 (1979): 348-59.

Bennett, Joan. Virginia Woolf: Her Art as Novelist. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1964.

Blackstone, Bernard. Virginia Woolf: A Commentary. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949.

Boone, Joseph Allan. "The Meaning of Elvedon in The Waves: A Key to Bernard's Experience and Woolf's Vision." Modern Fiction Studies 27 (1981-2): 629-37.

Boyd, Michael. The Reflexive Novel: Fiction as Critique. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1983.

Collins, Robert G. Virginia Woolf's Black Arrows of Sensation:The Waves. Ilfracombe: Arthur H. Stockwell, 1962.

Daiches, David. Virginia Woolf. New York: New Directions, 1942.

DiBattista, Maria. Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon. New Haven: Yale UP, 1980.

Docherty, Thomas. Reading (Absent) Character: Towards a Theory of Characterization in Fiction. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983.

Fleishman, Avrom. Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975.

Freedman, Ralph.The Lyrical Novel. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963.

——. Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1980.

Friedman, Melvin. Stream of Consciousness: A Study in Literary Method. New Haven: Yale UP, 1955.

Gorsky, Susan. "'The Central Shadow': Characterization in The Waves." Modern Fiction Studies 18 (1972): 449-66.

Graham, J. W. "Point of View in The Waves: Some Services of the Style." Virginia Woolf. Ed. Thomas S. W. Lewis. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975.

Guiguet, Jean. Virginia Woolf and her Works. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965.

Hafley, James. The Glass Roof: Virginia Woolf as Novelist. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1954.

Harper, Howard. Between Language and Silence. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1982.

Humphrey, Robert. Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1968.

Johnstone, J. K. The Bloomsbury Group. London: Secker & Warburg, 1954.

Kelley, Alice van Buren. The Novels of Virginia Woolf; Fact and Vision. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1973.

Little, Judy. Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1983.

Love, Jean O. Worlds in Consciousness. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1970.

Malmgren, Carl Darryl. Fictional Space in the Modernist and Post-Modernist American Novel. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1985.

McConnell, Frank D. "'Death Among the Apple Trees': The Waves and the World of Things." Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays. Ed. Claire Sprague. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

Meisel, Perry. The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater. New Haven: Yale UP, 1980.

Mendez, Charlotte Walker. "Creative Breakthrough: Sequence and the Blade of Consciousness in Virginia Woolf's The Waves." Women's Language and Style. Ed. Douglas Butturff and Edmund L. Epstein. Akron: U of Akron, 1978.

——. "Virginia Woolf and the Voices of Silence." Language and Style 13 (1980): 94-112.

Naremore, James. The World Seen Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel. New Haven: Yale UP, 1973.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On Truth and Falsity in Their Ultramoral Sense." The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche. Vol. 2. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964.

Payne, Michael. "The Eclipse of Order: The Ironic Structure of The Waves." Modern Fiction Studies 15 (1969): 209-18.

Poresky, Louise A. The Elusive Self. Newark: U of Delaware Press, 1981.

Rantavaara, Irma. Virginia Woolf's The Waves. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1969.

Richardson, Robert O. "Point of View in Virginia Woolf's The Waves." Texas Studies in Literature and Language 14 (1973): 691-709.

Richter, Harvena. Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970.

Savage, D. S. The Withered Branch: Six Studies in the Modern Novel. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1950.

Scholes, Robert, and Robert Kellogg. The Nature of Narrative. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1966.

Snow, Lotus. "The Wreckful Siege: Disorder in The Waves." Research Studies 42 (1974): 71-80.

Sypher, Eileen B. "The Waves: A Utopia of Androgyny?" Virginia Woolf: Centennial Essays. Ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg and Laura Moss Gottlieb. Troy: Whitston Publishing, 1983. 187-213.

Uspensky, Boris. A Poetics of Composition. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1973.

Warner, Eric, ed. Virginia Woolf: A Centenary Perspective. London: Macmillan, 1984.

Wasserman, Jerry. "Mimetic Form in The Waves." Journal of Narrative Technique 9 (1979): 41-52.

Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction," The Common Reader. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1925.

——. "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays. London: Hogarth Press, 1950.

——. A Reflection of the Other Person. The Letters of

Virginia Woolf 4. London: Hogarth Press, 1978.

——. A Room of One's Own. London: Granada, 1977.

——. The Waves. London: Granada, 1977.

——. The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts. Ed. J. W. Graham. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1976.

——. A Writer's Diary. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1953.